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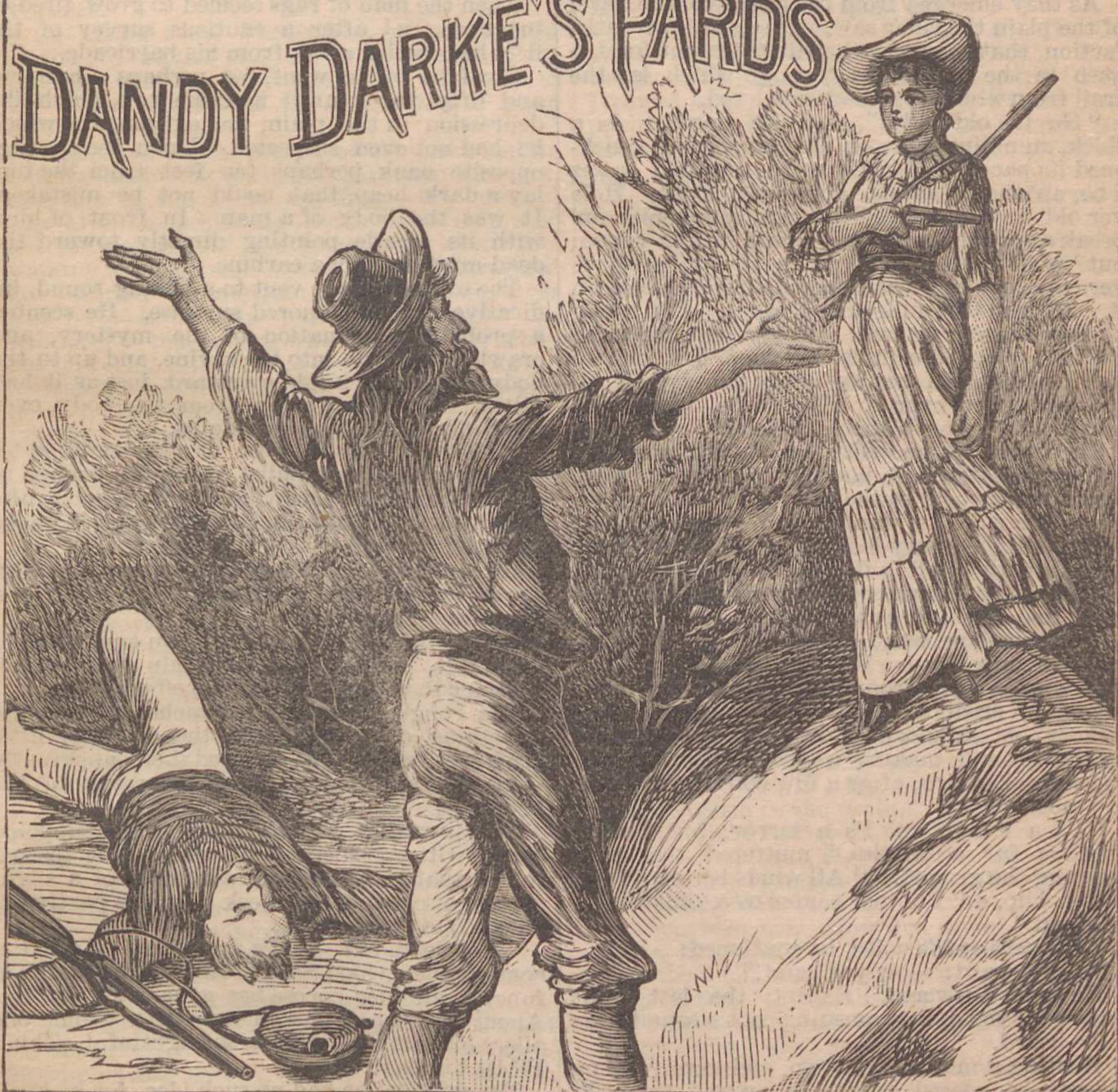
Vol. XVI. \$2.50 a Year.

Published Weekly by Beadle and Adams,
No. 98 WILLIAM ST., NEW YORK.

Price,
Five Cents.

No. 201.

DANDY DARKE'S PARDS



"YOU VILLAIN! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO HIM?" A CLEAR, RINGING VOICE ASKED
THE QUESTION.

Dandy Darke's Pards;

OR,

THE HAWKS OF HIGH PINE.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "DANDY DARKE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

JOHN, DUKE OF DENMARK.

MOUNTED upon a sorry-looking mustang, a man was making his way slowly along a trail that, leading partly through a gulch, approached the camp of High Pine from the northeast.

The man was every whit as dilapidated-looking as the beast; and from appearances they had been traveling long without rest or refreshment.

As they emerged from the gulch to the level of the plain the rider saw, with a smile of satisfaction, that they were heading straight for the gash in the mountains through which lay the trail from which they had wandered.

"Go it, old lady!" said the traveler, in a thick, rumbling whisper, as the mustang quickened its pace. "You'z ez nigh tuckered out ez I be, an' that's sayin' a dog-goned sight. Hole yer old head up or ye'll turn a summerset, an' break a leg fur some one. Thar! I told yer so; but 'tain't no use. Ef yer hain't no backbone yer can't hold yer head up, an' thar's an end on it. A clean fifty mile an' no water. Et's rough on ther funeral persesh. Ef yer stumble ag'in I'll take it ez a warnin' to reverse. I'll stick to yer, ole lady, ef I hev to carry yer myself all ther way from hyer to High Pine. Sanctified sole-leather! what's that? Whoa!"

There was no necessity for the exclamation, for the mustang had just stopped permanently. From somewhere to the rear there came the report of a rifle, the whack of a bullet striking flesh, and the sorry-looking steed sunk to the ground with a ball in its heart.

The missile had passed so near to the leg of the rider that he felt it go by.

The mustang went down; but the rider remained unharmed. With more agility than one who judged from his looks would have given him credit for, he flung himself out of the rickety old saddle, and dropped at full length on the ground, making a sort of barricade of the animal, which, after a few convulsive kicks, lay motionless.

"I's a tramp an' I's a terror; but I ain't anxious fur a wictim," muttered the man, hugging the ground. "All winds is rough fur a rotten ship, an' I'm ther center ov a diffikibility, ez usual."

Then raising his voice, he continued:

"I call, pard; show yer hand!"

No one answered. Except the last faint quiver of the dying mustang not a sound was to be heard.

Waiting a moment or two, and receiving no answer, he peered anxiously around the body of the dead horse, scanning the ground in the direction from whence the shot had come.

Nothing rewarded his scrutiny. For all he

could see or hear he might be alone upon the plain.

"Summat cur'us, thet. It mou't be a fallin' star, er a stroke er lightnin', only them ginerally comes down; an' I kin sw'ar that were a line shot, on ther level. Hev ter try it ag'in. Say, pard! Let's call it a new deal. I'll hold ther edge an' you chip er bunch ther keerds. It's your say-so, an' I'm a-watchin' ov yer; what yer goin' ter do?"

This time the ragged hero waited a full five minutes. Then he picked up the old blanket that had been loosely strapped to his saddle, and placing his hat on the end of the roll, carefully elevated it just above the back of the mustang.

"Pufferate thet with yer ole radiator," he chuckled.

But whoever the man in ambush might be he was evidently up to such Indian wiles, and the hat remained unperforated.

Then the man of rags seemed to grow tired of inaction, and after a cautious survey of the field he crawled away from his barricade.

Straight on he went, for perhaps a hundred and fifty yards, until he came to a gulch-like depression in the plain, the existence of which he had not even suspected. Upon the sloping, opposite bank, perhaps ten feet from the top, lay a dark heap, that could not be mistaken. It was the body of a man. In front of him, with its muzzle pointing directly toward the dead mustang, lay a carbine.

The explorer gave vent to a hissing sound, indicative of good-humored surprise. He scented a probable explanation of the mystery, and crawled on, down into the ravine, and up to the body, which lay head downward, just as it had fallen. A trail led away from the body, over the bank, toward the mountains.

"Thet's it! Thar were two on 'em fired together, an' this 'un's bullet went wide enough to come nigh slaughterin' yours truly. Sich is life. They've left his canteen, fur which blessin' make us truly, et cetery."

He carelessly undid the canteen from the body, shook it, and then placing it to his lips took a long draught.

"It's only water; but on sich an emergency I kin risk it. Ef I don't drop within a minute, I'll consider ther p'ison won't take effeck."

The rough, unkempt mustache curled into something of a smile, and the deep-set, little gray eyes twinkled as he stood there, apparently waiting to see what would be the result of the beverage.

Yet, in reality, he was watching the supposed corpse with considerable interest, for it seemed to him that he had caught a glimpse of a slight change of color in the cheek that was partly exposed to his view.

"Not dead, eh? Thet's my luck. Yere I'm come, to be a Good Samaritan, all ready fur a funeral, an' ther corpse hes gone back on me. About ther time I'm doin' my purtiest some one allers mounts me. Men is so ongrateful. Think I'll let him lay."

Nevertheless he had no such idea, for he knelt down, moistened the white lips with water, and then examined the wound, that seemed to be right in the center of the forehead.

"Ther shot war fired from ther bottom of ther rayvene, an' it glanced right 'round ther bone. It's better to be born lucky than rich, an' a thick skull's better than either. Stout legs ain't so bad moreover when there's a tramp aboard fur High Pine. What'll I do with him, anyhow?"

"You villain! what have you done to him?"

CHAPTER II.

A TRAITOR IN CAMP.

HIGH PINE, nestling among the hills, was a town that looked to the future. More than once in the past had it been the center of a "boom," and as often had it been raided out of existence, or a long continued drouth had rendered valueless the tolerably rich pay gravel of the placers in the valleys and gulches, while capital had not yet come in to furnish the needed machinery to work the somewhat intractable rock.

But High Pine, Phenix-like, as often grew again. Men plied pick, shovel and rocker in the gulches; and the Go-Down shaft, and one or two other mines, had the reputation of being embryo bonanzas.

Unfortunately the people of the place had an evil reputation, no worse, either, than the fact, and this as much as anything else, deterred capital from venturing there. The men who did the business of the town went about like walking arsenals, and every citizen interpreted law through the medium of his own revolver and bowie-knife. In addition the camp was tributary to marauders, who had their invisible, but powerful little empire, in the neighboring mountains, where they were supposed to know of rich placers, which they worked in conjunction with the trails leading out from High Pine.

For the most part immigrants approached the camp from the north, though the trail was arduous and full of dangers, because to the south the way swarmed with Apaches, who had taken in more than one outfit, and had sworn that no white man should pass through unless he cut his way with ball or steel. One would have supposed that none would have cared to enter such a place; but with gold as a bait what trap is there into which victims cannot be lured.

Besides, it was necessary to keep up connection with the outside world, and to the trains that occasionally went and came, in force, those seeking this land of promise, of which such vague, hazy reports could be heard, generally attached themselves.

Such a train was due at High Pine now.

Joseph Burke, better known as Geyser Joe, was on the way, bringing supplies for the Go-Down shaft, though under his wing journeyed a few who had hoped safely to run the gantlet of red-skins and outlaws. Reckless sports, or rough-handed miners were they, for the most part but there were two upon whom the keen, discriminating eyes of Geyser Joe looked with more disfavor than the wildest of these blades, since one was the pantherish, wild-eyed, treacherous-looking Mexican, Alan Argado, of whom he had heard no good report; and the other was a darkly handsome girl, Raquel by name, whom

the Mexican claimed as his daughter. The one might mean mischief, and the other trouble.

If Burke could have fallen behind a few hundred yards, and loitered unseen near to this pair, a little before sunset, he would have heard something that would have confirmed him in his instinctive suspicions, though it might, besides, have changed in some little his views in regard to Raquel.

The two were conversing earnestly, and apparently in no very amicable mood, for more than once Alan Argado lifted a threatening hand.

"Sancta Maria!" he growled. "Girl, do you want to bring death to both of us? What is this man to you that you should come between me and him? And, why have you thrust yourself in here to make my work harder than ever? Satan himself could never have supposed that you would, at the last moment swear that you would go to High Pine."

"There are many things, Alan Argado, that you do not know until they come about. From the moment I knew that you were going thither I vowed to go, too, for there is one there that I must meet. And from the time I knew that you were seeking to slay this man upon the way, I have sought to save him."

"And done so. But for you my knife would have found him before this."

"Yes, because he must live, though I do hate him because he is one of those who have taken the blood of the Argados. But you shall not kill him and then leave me to the mercy of the camp or the wilderness. They would slay me without a thought. Wait until we reach High Pine and then strike him at your will."

"But I cannot wait. I have vowed that even ere this I would have his life. The money, even, is in my hand. He must go no further or one who never forgives failure will call me to account."

"When?"

The question brought a look of trouble to his face. With a little hesitation he answered:

"When we reach High Pine."

"Yes, if you ever reach it. But something tells me that if your plan is successful this train will never reach High Pine. With its captain and leader gone, it will fall an easy prey to the gang of outlaws whose tool you are. You may choose to fall into their hands, but I don't and won't! Geyser Joe is my protection and I will protect him; yes, if I have to tell him to watch for an assassin in the train."

"What, and betray me?"

"Yes, even that, if you drive me to it. I, too, have my revenges and my hates, and gold nor threat can move me."

"Then hear me. How you divined my plans I know not; but you know them now. I will carry them out, and if again you interfere, I'll slay you, too. It will be my life or yours, and mine comes first with me. I came here to do my work and I shall not fail."

"Go on, then! There is war between us. If you win or lose the end will be your death. Close up now, I have nothing more to say."

She spoke these words with gloomy impressiveness and then lapsed into silence. In a short time they had caught up with the train,

That night Geyser Joe seemed to have a premonition of danger. Perhaps he scented danger in the air, perhaps he was not entirely satisfied with the location of his camp. He gave strict orders to the three men whom he had told to act as sentinels during the first relief, and then stole quietly away from the camp, being soon lost from sight in the long grass through which he snake-like made his way.

His absence created no alarm, and but little discussion in the camp. No one else scented danger, and the group by the camp-fire still kept up their careless conversation, in a tone little if any subdued.

Argado, indeed, had watched his departure with a fierce glitter in his eye, though soon after he had retired to his wagon, whither Raquel had already withdrawn. Even had the men at the camp-fire suspected his intention, unless they had drawn nearer it would have taken a sharp eye to have noted just when he slipped down from the wagon, and wormed his way out of camp, following in the direction which Geyser Joe had taken.

Certainly he, too, was well skilled in plains-craft, for he took the trail without much hesitation, and before very long was dogging his footsteps at no great distance.

But Burke, who was looking only for the danger that might be in front, gave no thought to that which might lurk behind.

His instincts had not deceived him. Before he had gone a mile he came upon what he knew was an Indian trail, not many hours old; and even in the uncertain light of the crescent moon he could see that the red-skins had been heading for a small clump of trees, that stood near the stream, and a mile or two further down the narrow valley.

He paused for a moment or two, debating within himself whether he should go on and follow the trail until it reached the motte, or whether he should go back to camp and warn the men of the discovery he had made. He would have sworn that he had plenty of time for either course, and perhaps for both.

While he crouched there, with his eyes fixed upon the dim outlines of the clump of timber, there came a sudden and startling interruption to his train of thought.

Like a tiger Alan Argado sprung upon his back, with one hand seizing him by the throat, while with the other he held high above him a gleaming knife.

"One, for revenge!" exclaimed the Mexican; and he struck fiercely at the broad neck of Geyser Joe.

CHAPTER III.

GEYSER JOE'S MAD CHARGE.

THE attack was so sudden, and so powerful was the gripe upon his throat, that, for a moment, Geyser Joe was in the most deadly danger.

But he was one who never could be taken altogether off his guard; and in any emergency he was as quick as lightning to act. At the first touch of the fingers, he had instinctively gathered his muscles together for action, and before they had fairly tightened he had flung himself around, face upward. With his left hand he

seized the wrist at his throat, with his right hand the descending arm, which, missing its stroke through his sudden motion, sent the grazing blade into the ground by his side. Then he drew his feet under the Mexican, and suddenly thrusting them out again, pitched Argado fairly over his head.

Had he been willing to use his revolver Burke would have had the Mexican at his mercy; but the Indian camp was too near. If there was any way of avoiding an alarm he wished to do so.

Drawing his own knife, he sprung forward, just as Argado, with cat-like activity, leaped from the ground, ready to renew the conflict.

The knives met together with an angry clang, and quick thrusts and quicker parries were made.

At length chance seemed to decide the contest. Parrying a blow, Burke threw his whole weight forward in a sudden return stroke, that, had it taken effect, would have settled Argado then and there.

But instinct, or the quiver of steel as the blades grated, told him what was coming, and he leaped lightly backward. Then the foot of Geyser Joe slipped in the grass where it was planted, and he fell at length upon the ground, just in front of his antagonist.

With a cry of delight the Mexican was about to hurl himself upon the prostrate man when a shadowy form darting from the darkness bounded over Burke and planted itself immediately in the way of the Mexican, while the voice of Raquel hissed in his ear:

"Fool, take this man last of all. Now, without him, we stand a good chance of being lost. Make your peace!"

She spoke in low, but thrillingly earnest tones, and to enforce her words in her outstretched hand she held a revolver.

Argado shrunk back. He knew something of Raquel. When she was in her moods it was dangerous to cross her. It would not be well to disregard her command, and she saw that, for the moment at least, he was cowed into obedience.

From the ground Geyser Joe sprung up, red-hot with rage; but to him Raquel turned, and the click of the lock sounded harshly on the night air as she forced back the hammer.

"Hold, there!" she exclaimed. "I have just saved your life. This thing must go no further here. I say it, and I mean it. I know that there is danger for yonder camp, and you cannot be spared from it. I know, too, that your life may yet be of use to me, and you shall have time for thought. When we have reached High Pine, you can take this fight up where you have left off."

"What! And leave this cowardly kiote the chance to slink away? Never! He dies hyer, and now."

"He is no coward, for he will meet you at any time, and if this be dropped until our journey's end is reached, there will be no reason for him to slink away. Promise, or die. No, no! Hands up! Make a move to draw that revolver and I pull trigger."

The Mexican stood a few paces back, licking his thin lips nervously. In his hand he still

grasped his knife; and it was plain that he felt a great uncertainty what was to be the end.

But, Raquel stood between the two with her eyes fixed steadily upon the American, and seemingly with little doubt but that her commands would be obeyed. She meant every syllable she uttered, and beyond a doubt she held in her hand the life of the man who seldom before this had been taken at advantage.

"Let it be so, leetle woman. You've got ther drop on me, an I knock under. I dunno what that slinkin' Greaser hez ag'in' me; but ef this quarrel kin be took up whar we leave off, when we've tracked out this trail, I ain't ther big-head too much to knock under now. But I'll keep a watch on him, though; an' ther first show of foul play I'll drill him. You understand that?"

"Yes, yes! There must, there shall be a truce between us until we reach High Pine. Come, Alan. Go back with me to camp."

The three, as if by mutual consent, lowered their weapons; and Raquel, turning, caught the Mexican by the arm, as though about to lead him away.

Just then there came to their ears the dull thunder of many muffled hoofs, close at hand. Without a second's hesitation the three flung themselves at full length upon the ground, for no very shrewd head did it take to guess that the red-skins had wrapped their horses' feet in pieces of old blanket and buffalo-hide, and were charging straight in for camp, and that they were about to sweep over that very ground.

There were half a dozen reasons why Burke, and the others, should not attempt to flee—the principal one being that, as they would undoubtedly be overtaken, the chances were a hundred to one that they would be shot down in their flight.

The chances seemed almost as great that they would be trampled under the hoofs of the mustangs, though it was possible that they would, of themselves, avoid the dark forms that their riders might not see, since their eyes were fixed on the camp beyond.

But a few minutes were given for consideration. Like a troop of phantoms, noiseless and grim, two-score of shadowy riders swept on, in straggling order, passing, for the most part, but a few yards from the spot where the three crouched.

In the camp beyond all was now silence. So early in the night vigilance was relaxed, especially as little danger was apprehended. If no warning was given the men of the train might be ridden down before they could form to resist the attack.

So seemed to think Raquel Argado, and she decided to risk her own chances, for she raised the revolver she still held, and took careful aim.

As she did so an arm reached over her shoulder and pressed her hand downward, while a voice whispered in her ear:

"Wait a minute, leetle woman. You are the true grit, but don't yer crowd ther mourners. Wait till I give ther word an' then you kin rustle 'em out a-howlin'. Lay low."

She sank back without a word, and the reason of Geyser Joe's advice was made plain.

At some little distance behind there came a

single warrior, who had evidently started later than his comrades, and was now heading directly for them, on a course that would bring him within a yard or two of Burke. For him the latter was prepared. In his pathway he sprung up, caught the bridle of his mustang, and wrenching the animal back upon its haunches, bounded at the throat of the savage who had bowed in his saddle at the shock of the sudden stoppage.

The fingers of Geyser Joe seldom missed their gripe. They sunk into the yielding flesh of the red-man, steady and strong, like the closing jaws of a vise. Then, with one ponderous wave of strength, Burke dragged him from his seat, and hurled him headlong to the ground, where he lay senseless.

Throughout the short, sharp struggle not a word or a cry had been uttered; and through it all Geyser Joe had, with his left hand, hung on to the bridle of the mustang.

Now he turned. Raquel was at his shoulder. He caught her up and flung her on the mustang. Then he vaulted up behind her, and steered toward camp in the wake of the Indians, who had slackened their pace somewhat as they caught sight of the glimmer of a still distant camp-fire.

Double weighted as he was the mustang bore Burke and the Mexican girl onward like a whirlwind.

"Now give it to 'em, an' don't waste a shot. They'll learn a thing or two, you bet!"

It was for a time no fight, but a hideous slaughter. The revolvers, at point-blank range, opened upon the backs of the unsuspecting red-men, at the very instant that the head of the mustang was level with the rear line.

One thing was certain; no surprise of the camp beyond could be made now, for at the first report, every man, without doubt, had grasped his weapons and prepared for the human avalanche.

Crack! crack! Again and again sounded those deadly tubes, report chasing report, while the flashes lit up the scene with what seemed almost one continuous flame.

Taken by surprise, which was made doubly intense from the attack being from their rear, the red-men slackened their pace, turned from every side toward the focus of destruction, and yet hesitated. An indiscriminate discharge of firearms would be more apt to damage friend than foe.

The momentary irresolution had been counted on by Geyser Joe when he planned his mad charge. While the foe drove in he drove on. Ten times his revolvers had spoken, scarcely ever in vain; and the girl before him had shown herself almost an expert.

Then as three warriors in their front sunk to their shots, they burst through the line, and steered directly for the camp.

It seemed as if success was almost within their grasp, when there was the ringing discharge of a rifle, the mustang leaped high in air, and then fell, flinging far his double burden, the man to the right, the woman to the left.

In an instant Burke was upon his feet looking keenly around. Since he had but two charges more in his revolvers, he was, for the moment,

almost unarmed; but he had no intention of deserting the girl who had stood by him so bravely.

Where was she now?

Perhaps the fall had somewhat dazed him; he could not answer. He could not even guess in what direction to look; and his keen, sweeping glance revealed nothing.

He could not remain there to be uselessly slaughtered, and perhaps he might at least draw the red-skins further on in pursuit and give her some slim chance to escape. He discharged the two remaining chambers of his pistols, and then bounded away. As he went he coolly began recharging the cylinders.

Certainly he seemed to bear a charmed life. A perfect hailstorm of missiles swept around him, and he was touched more than once, but he never faltered.

Camp was not far distant now, and those there seemed to understand the case at last. Again the rattle of fire-arms began, but now the rifles of a dozen sharpshooters were in the ring, and under their cover Geyser Joe darted into camp, breathless and bleeding, but all the more a dangerous foe.

Yet he had done his work already. All that was needed now was a vigorous front; the spirits of the assailants were broken by their losses, and within fifty yards of the little band of whites they wheeled and fled.

There was no sleep that night for the whites, though the In-lians did not again approach. Toward morning there was a momentary alarm; but it was caused by Alan Argado, who, in safety, crawled within the lines.

But he came alone. Raquel was missing, and when morning dawned, no trace could be found of her on the plain, while the red-men, who had gathered up their dead and wounded, had also disappeared.

Yet there was a possibility that the girl had escaped. Argado did not give up hope, though search proved vain. Neither he nor Burke alluded to their quarrel of the night before.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HAWKS OF HIGH PINE.

NORTHEAST of High Pine, at some little distance down the trail, four men stood, engaged in low, earnest conversation. Three of them seemed to be burly ruffians, such as were plenty and to spare, and scarcely merited particular description. The fourth, the ruling spirit of the party, was a young man, whose face was intelligent, and handsome, with a dark, cruel, crafty beauty, that attracted perhaps, and yet warned. He was hastening to a report, with a savage sneer on his thin, tightly-set lips.

"I tell yer, captain, ef yer think we're foolin' away our time, jist you kim up an' try it yerself. Ther Red Sport ain't no slouch. We might lay for him down at ther shaft, perhaps; but yer seem to fight shy of that, fur fear of alarmin' ther rest."

"No, no! That would not answer. The job must be done right here in High Pine. What are you worth, if in a whole month you could find no chance to drop this man?"

"It ain't so easy when he hes his hand allers fingerin' 'round his revolver, an' yer know he

pulls quick, an' shoots plumb center. An' when I thort I'd fix up a little game to prove that he was cheatin', this cussed Dandy Darke, az they call him, kept his eye on me all ther time Red B'ar wasn't lookin'. Oh, they're a boss outfit, they are; an' two pards sich ez yer read about. Thet young cuss is certain death; an' you ought to know that, captain."

"Thank you. He is a solid man; but I'm not paying you to find out what's no secret. If Argado don't do his work any better, I'll slaughter him."

"Ef he kin git away with Geyser Joe, he earns his money. Ef you take my advice, you'll begin at the t'other end. Dandy Darke is the brains of ther gang. Clear him outer ther road, pick off ther Red Sport an' Joe, an' finish up with ther calico. Then you kin hop into ther Go-Down lively. Er git the boys together an' wade right inter ther fort at onst. High Pine won't keer shucks."

"No! His friends first, the women next, and then Dave Dorland; and he must come into my hands alive. There's a debt of vengeance that his death alone cannot pay. Curse him, when he does die, it shall be by inches."

"All right! You take yer revenge, an' we'll take ther ducats. But we can't worry along this way much longer, ther boys won't stand it."

"They will not have long to wait, they and the red-skins will get a fair booty out of the train; and whether they succeed in that or not, the plans are being laid that will put the shaft into our hands. I have a man inside there that does work. The only difference is, the fighting may be a little harder."

"Thet's in the bargain. But, why don't yer come inter High Pine? Fixed up that way who's goin' to know you? And, somehow, you could pick out ther game a heap sight better than we kin. How did yer nose it out?"

"By keeping my ears open; you plug yours up with benzine, and then grumble because you hear nothing. But go back and do the best you can. I have reasons for remaining in the dark. The end is not far off!"

"Bully fer ther end, that's all! But ther sooner Faro Frank kims to life ag'in ther better fur the Hawks ov High Pine."

With a few parting injunctions the outlaw, whose name had just been revealed, turned away, and strode down the mountain-side, while the three men shouldered the rifles they carried, and turned their faces toward High Pine.

Once there they adjourned for an hour to the shanty in which they lived, and then started for "The Glory" saloon. Just as they were about entering, a horse and rider dashed by, and the three halted.

"Thar's a chance now, an' dog-gone our fool luck, hyar we are, all afoot; she's driftin' right down ther trail, an' a blind man could scoop her."

"It's Lalaree, ther Injun gal, sure enough, an' she's worth a cool hundred an' fifty: but she hez ther tools about her to make a funeral, an' don't you fergit she knows how to use 'em. She's twice ther sand ther yaller-haired one hez, an' I'll bet rocks she won't be alone long."

"No; 'cause we's goin' to be with her," inter-

posed the third. "Quit yer chin music, shut yer grub-traps, an' kin on. To git one of ther gals brings ez much ez to drop ther Red Sport."

Without delay the three turned aside, and made a circuit, at length coming out upon the trail of the young girl, who had long since passed out of sight.

Straight down the rugged road had she dashed, and though once or twice she looked back, there was no hesitation upon her part until she had thrown behind her a number of miles, and had reached a point where, for quite a distance, the view was comparatively unobstructed.

Here she reined in her horse and cast a long, searching look at the rolling plain that stretched out and away from her feet.

Nothing rewarded her sight, and she shook her head with a gesture of impatience.

"No signs of them yet. If they had met with no misfortune they should have been here at least three days ago. Why do they not come? Is it possible that father—that he whom I have, for so many years, called father—can have learned something that seemed to verify my half-formed suspicions? If he *has* he will never leave until he knows for a certainty that Bruce Arden is either living or dead. And if he lives, though he may know not and dream not whither I have drifted, he is still true to me. If he lives, not even Maud can keep me here. Ah!"

She ceased her soliloquy, and peered more anxiously than ever along the trail. She had a marvelously clear vision, and now, away out upon the plain, she saw the figure of a man, who suddenly emerged from a hidden ravine and halted a moment after he had come into view. Following him was another figure, that of a woman, who ran lightly to him, caught him by the shoulder with one hand, while, with the other uplifted, she seemed to menace him.

Lalaree, as the desperado had named her, shaded her eyes with her hand, and watched the scene with strange interest. The distance was too great to catch more than a blurred view of the figures; but it was not hard to guess the nature of the interview from the gestures of the two.

The woman implored; the man repelled. The woman threatened, the man responded by drawing himself up into an attitude of proud contempt. Then she shook her fist once more, and turning, glided into the ravine from which they had emerged.

The man seemed angered, at last. He wheeled and threw up his arms as though aiming a rifle. There was a puff of smoke, the echo of a distant report, and then the man pitched heavily forward.

CHAPTER V.

THE ROAD-VAGABOND'S LITTLE DODGE.

"YOU villain! What *have* you done to him?"

A clear, ringing voice asked the question, and the vagabond of the opening episode of our story, saw, standing upon the brow of the bank, just above him, a girl woman of wonderful beauty, who held pointed straight for his heart a cocked revolver. It was Lalaree's finger that lay on the trigger, and several days subsequent to the night attack on Geyser Joe's train.

He understood the necessities of the case upon the instant, and extended his ragged arms with what was intended to be a graceful flourish, showing that either hand was weaponless.

"My princess, I ain't done nothin'; though this noble duke in disguise, lettin' off his fire-arms permisc'us like, salted me noble steed, an' come within an inch ov boring your humble servant. Some one else did the business fur him, an' yonder goes ther trail ov ther critter. Ef yer hev an eye fur sich yer kin see et plain ez a wagon-road."

The girl involuntarily followed the direction indicated by the gesture, and the man took the opportunity to drop one hand behind his back.

"And who are you?" continued the newcomer, once more piercing the ragged man with her glittering eyes.

"I'm John, Duke ov Denmark, may it please yer grace, hyer incog. I war travelin' in state, on ther back ov a quadriped ov royal perpor-tions, but ther carelessness ov this victim hes redoosed me to a foot-passenger. Ef yer can't do better nor ax questions pass 'round on t'other side. You mou't be too much ov a shock when he comes to. I see he's gettin' ready to rise."

The girl, who had stood aloof with a natural cautiousness, took a step or two forward, and looked downward with a curious glance, while the eccentric individual, who had styled himself the Duke of Denmark, seemed fully as much interested in her.

He was both puzzled and astonished. Who she was and what she was doing there, were questions not easy to answer.

She was dressed in a costume of semi-savage style, though the materials spoke loudly of civilization. Her magnificent hair was bound up in a great ebon, coiled braid, under a soft white sombrero. Around her waist was the belt from which she had drawn the revolver, and on her back was strapped a light carbine. Her face had a wonderful beauty of color and contour; and her eyes, black as midnight, had a brave, honest look. A beautiful girl, out upon the High Pine trail alone; no wonder that the man was astonished.

But there was more to come from this chance meeting. The black-eyed beauty gave a glance, and then, suddenly, with a cry of terrible surprise, she covered her face with her hands, and bounded aimlessly forward, into the very arms of the ragged man.

At the same time the hitherto motionless body moved, the hands stretched out spasmodically, and from the white lips there escaped a low, hollow groan.

"Thunder an' blood! what's ther matter now?" exclaimed the Duke, more amazed than ever.

"This!" exclaimed a harsh voice. "You and that girl are our prisoners. Up with your hands, and surrender!"

Three men, armed with rifles, appeared at the same spot on the bank where the girl had first stood.

"Up they are; an' ef yer move hand er foot I'll plug yer all. I hold ther drop."

And the hands of the Duke shot out; in each a leveled revolver.

The vagabond had the advantage in more ways than one. The girl protected him from

anything but very close shooting, and he had his revolvers cocked and leveled, while the three men simply grasped their rifles. If he was the expert with his weapons that the manner of their production seemed to promise, it was no vain boast when he said that if they moved he would "plug" them all.

The spokesman of the three realized this, and promptly came down.

"Hold on, hold on!" he hurriedly exclaimed. "We haven't any quarrel with you. You can just travel on out of this. That will save trouble all 'round. The girl is our pris'ner, though, an' we mean to have her."

"Talk much, lie much." I just guess not. Ef yer want pris'ners go up to High Pine an' snake 'em out; this one's enuff fur me."

"But I tell you she is ours! Come to reason. The Hawks of High Pine claim her; and you can be sure they never drop their prey."

"Ther Hawks ov High Pine!" said the Duke reflectively. "Yes, I've hearn on 'em; but I can't help it, ef I hev to fight ther hull condemned b'ilin'. Allee samee I've got ther leetle gal in tow, an' I'm goin' to waltz her inter High Pine if she wants to go. How is it, leetle woman?"

Lalaree had recovered her self-possession somewhat, and had stepped a little to one side, leaving her protector uncovered and alone, while she scanned the faces of the three. The question recalled her more and more to herself. She turned around quickly, and pointed downward at the man who again lay motionless, and whom the outlaws had not yet noticed.

"What! And leave him to their tender mercies?"

"Thet's about the size ov it. I ain't certain fur more than two ov 'em. Ef it comes to a diffikability, the third may run me through ther starch. Make up yer mind quick, fer it's time to be movin'."

"Then I stay here with him alone. Back, villains, back! Touch him not on your lives! Oh, Bruce Arden, if it be indeed you, I will protect you with life itself!"

She stooped suddenly, and caught up the revolver which had been dropped in her surprise, and then sprung to the side of the wounded man. Upon one arm she raised his neck, gathering his bleeding head to her bosom, while the other hand, outstretched, menaced the third of the outlaws.

"That's the game, is it? 'Allee lightee,' then. I'll play the hand right along. Hyer, you Hawks, step down ther bank, anglin' to ther left, an' let us see the breadth ov yer backs an' ther length ov yer steps. The man that looks back I'll drop. It's biz I'm talkin'. Git!"

There was a momentary hesitation, and then the strong will of the vagabond triumphed.

"Give it up, boys," said the leader of the Hawks. "I think I know the bloke, and he puts them just where he wants them. As for the girl, we can wait for a better chance. Good-morning! we're going now."

The last sentence was addressed to the Duke of Denmark, and was spoken with a great deal of mock-politeness. Then the three stepped off in the direction indicated, while the vagabond still stood, covering the two, and the girl menaced the third.

"Now, leetle woman, light out ov hyer afore they git outer range of these barkers. When they git a leetle furder you'll see 'em wheel an' open fire."

"I understand. Hold them a moment longer."

She thrust her pistol in her belt, and gathering the wounded man, whom she had called Bruce Arden, in her arms, she carried him quietly up the bank. Just before disappearing she turned with a whisper:

"A thousand thanks? In another minute we will be safe; then look to yourself."

Then, she was gone, leaving her late defender to hold his own with the three, who were already at long pistol-range. A little later the hoof-strokes of a galloping horse, heading for High Pine, could be faintly heard.

As the girl and her burden disappeared, the Duke changed his tactics somewhat, and stepped noiselessly out after the retreating outlaws; yet by slanting a little, he ascended the bank, so that, still keeping them in range, he gradually assumed a commanding position.

As he had expected, they suddenly wheeled and threw up their rifles, pointing them toward the spot where, a short time before, he had been standing.

He was not there now; and a mocking laugh from above echoed through the little gulch, pointing out where he stood.

Instantly there was a sudden change in the direction of the barrels, and a sharp fusilade, as three rifles were discharged at the man, who was seen suddenly to fall forward and almost disappear from sight as he lay along the bank.

"He's a dead goat, sure!" exclaimed one of the outlaws.

"Ha! ha! ha!" came back from the bank. "Look out for his horns. I've got you sure, slick as butter."

Then came the report of two revolvers, and two men sunk, howling with pain, each bored through the leg just above the knee. The third dropped his rifle and threw up his hands.

"Hold on, mister, I cave! You wouldn't plug a poor orphan, would you?"

"I'd plug an orphan's great-grandfather ef he tried to tramp on my toes; but if you mean it square, I've no quarrel with you. You look arter yer pards, an' I'll go to High Pine."

"Go, in the fiend's name!" shouted one of the fallen men. "But look out for the future."

"There's noomerous galoots remarked that afore; By-by! Glad to see you up yonder. I'll slide out fur fear yer pards may come. I reckon there's more o' ther kiote than hawk about yer crowd, an' yer hunts in packs. Don't get excited. I've come hyer to stay; an' ef ther Hawks hunt me they kin find me. No nonsense, now, er I'll finish my job."

With his eyes fixed upon the little knot of outlaws he fell back for a short distance, until another depression offered him a cover, when he immediately disappeared from view.

He did not linger in the vicinity. It was a dangerous neighborhood just now. With face turned toward High Pine he got over the ground with a long, swinging stride that bade fair to rapidly devour the half-dozen miles that lay between him and his goal.

As for the girl, he caught but one distant

glimpse of her. She was mounted now, and in front of her she managed to support a burden. To the last she seemed determined to hold to the young man who had come so near to death, if he was not, even now, booked for a passage through the dark portals.

Yet if he had caught a glimpse of her face he would have known that the splendid self-possession with which she had first looked at the wounded man, and the courage with which she had afterward defended him, were both gone. With a white face and trembling frame she pushed on and up, never once daring to look downward at her burden, which rested so still and motionless in her arms.

For several miles she urged on her steed.

Then the man stirred uneasily, and moaned.

She shuddered at the sound and motion; her grasp relaxed a little, and he slid to the ground.

She looked around.

There was no sign of pursuit; as far as she could see in every direction there was no living being. She dismounted and threw the reins over her horse's head, so that they hung in front of him. She had not the strength to again place the wounded man upon her mustang, so she dragged him aside to what seemed an easier resting-place, pillow'd his head carefully on a bunch of moss and gave him a long, searching, wondering look, before she turned away. She was not leaving him without a mental struggle; but he needed aid, at once; and it was her intention to go and bring it.

She caught her mustang by the bridle and swung herself into the saddle, yet still it seemed as though she could not bear to leave the spot, but checking the anxiety of her steed she rode slowly away.

After a little she turned in her saddle and looked backward, and then uttered a scream of surprise, for as she gazed she saw the wounded man stagger to his feet, turn around once or twice in a dazed, blind sort of way, and then plunge staggering forward into a thick undergrowth of young pines.

Having uttered that one cry, which the young man seemed neither to hear nor to heed, Lalaree wheeled her mustang, and striking him sharply with her hand and urging him with her voice, darted back in pursuit. Into the pines she forced her way for a short distance; but it was a vain quest. The undergrowth had swallowed him up, and before she had gone many yards she found her way so impenetrably barred that she was forced to desist. She listened but could hear no sound of footsteps beyond.

"Ah, I can never follow him here; and if I could it would be to no purpose. I must have Mato Luta. He can trail him; but it will be a terrible waste of time to go for him. Still, I will go."

Muttering thus she turned and forced her way out from the bushes.

And as she came out into the clearer ground of the trail a hand of iron was suddenly laid upon her bridle rein, and looking up she saw herself confronted by half a dozen great, brawny-looking fiends, in the full war-paint and feathers of Apache warriors.

"Ugh!" said the one at her bridle, in a guttural tone. "Good! Squaw heap good pris'ner!"

Come 'long! No stop here! No shoot neither, er Apaches take brown squaw's scalp."

As Lalaree's hand was dropping toward her belt a brawny hand seized her wrist and swung her out of the saddle.

CHAPTER VI.

A DEAL FOR THE GO-DOWN.

SOMETHING over twenty-four hours had elapsed since the vagabondish-looking man, who was so ready with his revolvers, had met with his adventures just without High Pine, and now he was seated in one corner of the room in which the questionable liquors of "The Glory" saloon were handed out over the rough slab counter. He had come in rather early in the evening and quietly mingled with the throng that had already gathered, and as he was accompanied by a well-known denizen, whose acquaintance he had somehow made, was soon very much at home.

There was one rather talkative individual at whom he cast several inquisitive glances, and after a time, by a careless invitation to join him at the bar, he succeeded in opening up a conversation, which naturally turned upon the mines and miners of the neighborhood. He asked a few questions that might have led a suspicious hearer to believe that Mr. Duke, as he was styled, might not be as much of a stranger as he had seemed.

"Yes, yes," answered the High Piner, at length. "It must be ther Go-Down shaft you're speaking of. It's an old hole, an' no mistake. Been worked for a hundred year; mebbe more. There's been a heap of rock taken out, from ther bigness of the drift; but somehow it's powerful on-lucky. No one works it more than three months."

"Why so?" asked the Duke, with every appearance of a lively interest.

"They allers dies—though I must say it's purty often just after they've got rid of it. I've heerd, when the strike war made hyer, ten year ago, they found a shaft there, chuck full of bones. Fur a long time they took it fur a grave-yard, an' no one tackled it; but at last they scooped it out, and it's been going purty much ever since, off and on. Nobody makes a fortune, but there's been more than a hundred just a-going to."

"But who has it now?"

"Now it's doing better. Sacramento Sam an' a young chap, Charley Blake, got in an' give it a good send-off; but just as things got in good shape Faro Frank salivated them. Didn't do him much good though, as half a dozen parties struck fer it, an' boosted him clean out in the cold on the first bounce. In the end Charley Blake's sister came out ahead, fer a chap that they called Dandy Darke, a tough named Geyser Joe and an Injun known as ther Red Sport backed her hand heavy. They say they're all married or related and that Dandy Darke has an old Mexican land grant that covers about all the land in the valley, though that last don't count much, nohow. Ef Faro Frank don't make trouble, there's no one in High Pine wants to jump that lay-out!"

"Faro Frank! Oh, yes! He's ther one that opened ther last riot, yer say. How did they come to freeze him out?"

"He an' Dandy Darke locked horns right hyer in High Pine, about Charley Blake's sister. There's different stories about it; but I reckon a red galoot that helps to run the town chipped in; they call him the Red Sport, an' between 'em they just mashed ther card sharp. He was cut up bad about ther head, an' they stove his ribs right in. He's a bad little man, though, you bet; an' I'd gamble money on it, that he makes another lay fur ther Go-Down."

"Faro Frank, eh? I've heerd ov him. Is he 'round hyar?"

"Haven't seen him since the ruction. He laid up at Mendez, the Mexican's, an' I did hear that after he'd pulled together again he swore he'd hev ther Go-Down, an' square accountts with the crowd that's running it. Ef you'd see Mendez, he's a side partner of Frank's, he might post you up a bit."

"Thankee, thankee. Ef he waits fur me to ask him he'll never tell. It's none of my lay-out, an' I don't keer how ther game runs. I was only askin'. I've heered ov this place, an' they said it war lively, chuck full ov fun, clear up to ther nozzle; but from what I've seen it's nothin' to brag on. The crowd at ther Go-Down seems to be full ov sand; but ez fur ther rest, ther' ha'dly middlin'. Think they'd give me a show? I'd ask 'em ef I could find 'em. Whar mou't I be likely to kim across this Geyser Joe? Eh?"

"He's out on ther trail jist now, since I kim to think on it; but Dandy Darke, he's the maiu boss, an' ther Injun sport is 'round, an' ll do ez well. But they're mighty partic'ler, pard; an' hain't much use fur outsiders. They mou't take yer on if you war willin' to swing a pick right lively; but it's on'y a chance."

"Thankee, allee samee, I guess I'll bristle 'round a bit. Ther Glory's ruthyer slow. I count on havin' some fun, but ther' don't seem to be much show fur it hyer."

"Keep yer eye open, pard, I'm a quiet duck meself; but there's boys in High Pine that kin show ez much pressure to the square inch as ary machine ever invented. Eyes open, an' hands down. Thet's ther way to walk in this camp. You hear me, pard?"

Not caring to remain longer, at that time, Duke passed out into the straggling main street.

For a few moments he looked first up and then down the town, with the air of a man that had in view some course of action; but could not entirely make up his mind.

The camp seemed buried in silence. Here and there a light flickered in some shanty; and now and then he could catch a glimpse of a flitting form; but for once High Pine seemed on its good behavior.

"I'll resk it," said the vagabond, at length. "There's not much to be made, but it ain't goin' to hurt to take a squint at the way the land lays. Hyer goes fur ther Go-Down."

At a brisk pace he started off, and without any sign of hesitation made his way through the town and on down the slope which led to the mine.

"This hyer's about the spot," he muttered, "an' a nice little nest they've made ov it. Reg'lar fort; take a small-sized army to git in thar."

The spot indicated by the direction of his

glances was indeed a fort in miniature. That is, there was a stockade, such as in Western parlance is called a fort, strong enough to enable a resolute little band of sharpshooters to beat off a force very much greater than their own, if armed only with ordinary fire-arms; of course it would not have afforded much protection against artillery. On three sides was the stockade, roughly built, with its walls pierced with loopholes; on the fourth rose the mountain, overhanging and almost inaccessible. It was a spot well calculated for defense; and the experience of the different owners of the shaft had convinced them that the probabilities were that they could not be too securely fortified.

One thing was, to a certain extent, in their favor, there were no immediate neighbors. By daylight it was not likely that any attack would be made; after dark any one found in the vicinity could be considered an enemy, for no outsider had any business there.

The Duke seemed to understand this, for, as he drew nearer, he began to act with the utmost caution. He changed his course so that his form would not be limned against the sky; and glided up to the stockade with the noiseless step of a panther, stealing upon its prey. As he was peering curiously through a loophole, he heard, just in time, the tread of a foot almost as light as his own, and without an instant's hesitation he threw himself down at full length against the stockade, with face toward the approaching man, who turned out to be a regular sentinel.

He came along without suspicion, his track being but a few yards from the man who lay upon the ground, though not once did his eyes wander that way. Evidently his attention was directed elsewhere, for when he had passed some little distance he halted, and first giving a nervous glance at the top of the wall, as though to assure himself that there was no one observing him, he crouched down into a half-kneeling position, and waited in silence.

He did not have long to wait, for hardly had he settled himself into position when there came, from the darkness without, a low, hissing sound, that might have been made by a serpent, but was not. The sentinel at once responded in the same way, and waited.

"Hello!" thought the Duke. "Hyer's somethin' in the wind wu'th lookin' arter. Ther's eyes on ther Go-Down, besides mine; may as well hev ther tools ready to take 'em both in."

He had a revolver in his right hand already; he carefully drew its mate with his left, and awaited to see what was to come of the meeting. Right up from the ground, not a dozen yards away, there suddenly rose a dark form, causing a low expression of surprise from the sentry.

"Hush," said a warning whisper, and the dark form dropped again to the ground, but advanced until immediately in front of the sentinel who held out his hand to be warmly grasped.

"It's risky, Tom Brace, but I thought I'd try it, fer there's not much chance any other way of getting a talk, and it is time that we had things arranged. You got the note I left for you over in the hollow stump?"

"Yes, but it is not safe, and I was glad you did not trust anything there that might have made trouble if found. How are things working? Is the prospect going to be worth hard knocks, and a risk of life?"

"Oh, there's no discount on it. They have found the lead, and it just pans out heavy. There's millions in it. There ain't no such strike this side of the Cemstock. It's a big thing, I tell you. It runs five hundred to the ton straight along, and they say they struck a chimblly today where you can add one aught anyhow, and then not get the figures high enough."

"But what's this about their going up to High Pine to bunk? We mustn't make any mistake."

"That's all right. There was some fool notion about the Apaches coming in; and they were afraid fur the women. That's about over now. I can't see how it makes any difference either. The more of 'em that's out the easier it will be to take in the rest."

"Yes; but that is where you are wrong. It's easier to let some one else do your digging for you, and then gobble it up at your leisure. Sooner or later they will all have to pay tribute. Just for the mine the Hawks wouldn't move an inch."

"For what, then, would you move?"

"For revenge!"

Brace hissed the words out with a vengefulness that was full of dire meaning.

"For revenge! This Geyser Joe betrayed us once. He made his old comrades suffer because one of them attempted his life. And this Dave Dorlan, who is the head man now, has been the first man who could head off the Hawks of High Pine. Between him and us there is war to the knife. He has blood on his hands that can never be washed off."

"Well, well; there's more than one of us hates him. He knocked me endways, just because I spoke kind of pleasant like to the half-breed squaw that they've got in tow. Curse her, she carries more style than all the belles of 'Frisco."

"And you won't forgive him. Well, never mind that. We must come to an understanding. How many of the men can we rely on?"

"Have them all sounded except Joe Beams. No use trying him. The rest are all ready to drop their hands and jump the game on the fu'st bluff. The last fight sickened them. This time you must make no mistakes, though. Shoot first; and look after the woman when there's nothing else left to attend to. If I use the chloroform and let you in that's all you can expect of me."

"That is all we ask. When you are ready, tack a piece of red flannel on the post-office stump, and when you have your work done show a light at the lower corner of the stockade outside. We will be along half an hour later, at the furthest."

"That's all understood; but what time do you want all this done? I want a chance to lay my pipes."

"So do we, for that matter. We'll say Sunday night. If there's any alteration I'll let you know."

"How? I don't want any risks run."

"No danger. If we can't do any better we will start a fire on, or near Black Top, in the afternoon. That will show you the thing is off."

"I'll look for it. Now go. If any one should find us here together there wouldn't be any fire started on Black Top; but they'd be a stirring up of another fire, that you nor I ain't anxious to reach for a score or more of years."

The stranger chuckled softly, and turning glided away. Then the sentinel went on his way; and the minute he turned the corner of the stockade, Duke began cautiously to worm his way backward, toward the other corner, around which he finally disappeared. Then he rose to his feet and hurried away, until he had reached a fair offing, outside of rifle range. Here he halted and looked back.

As he stood there, with his eyes fixed upon the stockade, there came to his ears the sound of rapid hoofstrokes, and a single horseman darted out of the gloom.

CHAPTER VII.

BRUCE ARDEN REACHES THE LAND OF PROMISE —FUN AT HIGH PINE.

The approach of the horseman did not seem to give Duke much uneasiness. From his appearance robbers would scarcely care to pick him up for booty, and the only personal foes he could have near or in High Pine would be the Hawks, to whom it was not likely that the rider belonged. Nevertheless he dropped his hand circumspectly to his belt, so as to be ready for any emergency; and waited.

The horseman seemed to be as wary as himself, for though he stood so motionless, and almost invisible in the gloom, there was a sudden halt.

"Hello, there, stranger! How far is it to High Pine?"

"Five minutes, more er less, accordin' ez yer put ther steam on. Consider'ble more goin' in ef yer don't know how ther tigers up thar is goin' to receive yer; consider'ble less ef ye'r comin' out an' ther tigers a-growlin' behind yer. Take my advice, stranger, an' don't go thar."

The horseman laughed a careless, reckless sort of laugh.

"Thank you, my friend, you are not the first that has given that advice; but all the same I'm on the road, and hardly feel like turning back now. I've got very little to live fer in this world, unless it is revenge; and if they've told me the truth back in 'Frisco, that's something I'll find there."

"Jist ez yer like, jist ez yer like! I'm goin' up thet way, an' I'll walk along. I'm a stranger in High Pine, without pard er backer; but I ain't a bad man to tie to."

"A stranger? Then you can hardly tell me whether I will find one there whom I seek."

"That 'pends on his handle. Jist so you don't says it's John Duke, spit out his name, an' mebbe I kin give yer satisfaction. I've heerd considerable since I struck ther camp."

"And you have heard the name of Murray Brandt mentioned?"

"Oh, he's dead! Now I've given yer a hint of

how they call me to supper; s'pose yer confide ther name yer to go by hyer."

But the man gave no answer, for the first words of Duke had apparently unmanned him. He started violently, drew in his horse with a nervous gesture, and then sat silent.

"Don't faint, mister; it's a Gospel truth. He tried to jump a claim fer some sharps here, and they went through him on wheels."

"What, dead? No! You don't tell me he is dead!"

"You talk ez tho' you'd lost yer best friend. Can't say ther news was very shocking to me. Did he owe yer money, er was he only a side partner?"

"Neither. It is the thought of the regret that I will have for a lifetime that he did not die by my hand, which breaks my heart. Curse him, dead or living! I followed his trail all the way from 'Frisco just to get my fingers on his foul throat."

"Take some other man, then; an' make believe it's him. Don't sorrow over it, stranger, there'll be lots ov chances in High Pine. Come, give us yer handle, stranger, an' then we'll joggle along."

"My name? Oh, yes. It's one I'm not ashamed of—Bruce Arden."

At that John Duke started as much as the stranger had done, and uttered a long-drawn whistle that seemed involuntary with him, whenever taken by surprise.

"Bruce Arden, eh? An' just through from 'Frisco. Say. You weren't froticking round north of town a couple days ago, and didn't get drilled plumb through the forehead, eh?"

"No; what do you mean? Two days ago I was a hundred miles southeast of thi..."

The stranger spoke as though full of some illy-defined suspicion. Did he tell the truth?

"Um! More of a mystery. All right. We'll see better in the mornin'. I'm going to High Pine; if ye'r' anxious fur meditashun an' prayer I'll leave yer hyer fur ther Hawks to gobble up; but I've been out in ther damp 'most long enough."

As he spoke Duke turned away, and strode along for a time slowly, but after a few moments the stranger, who had given his name as Bruce Arden, ranged up to his side, and the two journeyed on without interruption, and with considerable conversation, until the camp was reached.

As they came in front of the "Star" saloon they halted; for, from the opposite direction, they heard the sound of horses' feet, and the noise of an approaching train.

It was Geyser Joe and his party, just in.

As Burke swung himself from his mustang he looked sharply around at a lowering, dark-faced man, in a broad sombrero. He was mindful of the fact that there were certain scores to settle with Alan Argado, and it might be that the reckoning would begin at once, though, since the night of the Indian attack, no reference had been made to the duel which had been interrupted. Nor, from that night, had they heard or seen anything of the missing Raquel. It seemed as though she must have fallen into the hands of the Apaches, since, under any other supposition, there would have been at

least some trail left behind to reward the diligent search which was made the day after the attack upon their camp.

It seemed possible that the Mexican had reconsidered his intentions, and that his heart had been somewhat softened by the good offices of Geyser Joe. At any rate he did not linger long but almost immediately entered the saloon.

As he vanished from sight Geyser Joe turned around; and found himself face to face with Bruce Arden and John Duke.

Although it was night there was a flood of light from the open doorway of the "Star," sufficiently bright to serve to some good purpose a pair of sharp eyes; and here seemed to be two pair, for on the instant each man gave a start. Then Burke strode a step forward.

"Are you man or ghost?" he muttered. "If you are man, then how in the name of Heaven do yer come hyer?"

Arden seemed not less agitated at the sudden meeting. At first sight he dropped his hands cautiously to his belt; and then, as suddenly he opened his fingers wide and raised his empty hands.

"I am no ghost, but simply flesh and blood; no thanks to you, though. I came here on the trail of revenge. If he I sought is dead, it is a lucky chance that I found you, his willing tool.

"Hold on, hold on, young man!"

A flush of anger began to show itself in Geyser Joe's face.

"Don't threaten me. I'm not ther kind to take such talk. I don't want to hush you; but Geyser Joe was never used to hear that kind ov clatter without answerin' it with fist er revolver. Say out what you want, but draw it a shade mi'elsr."

"You don't want to hurt me now because the foul patron that paid you is cold in death. If Murray Brandt was living you would have a different story to tell. But, on your life, what have you done?"

Burke interrupted him sternly.

"Is the boy mad? I mashed him once, endways; no thanks, though, to Murray Brandt and his gang, for I was only paddlin' my own canoe."

"Liar!" exclaimed the young man, his frame quivering with intense passion, while his flushed face gradually grew white with rage.

For a moment after that one word, fairly howled forth, there was intense silence. John Duke stood with his arms folded across his breast, looking on in amused wonder, but behind and around him were, by this time, a score of the men of High Pine. There was nothing of amusement in their faces, for one and all knew Geyser Joe, and expected to see him drop his man without further parley. What was their surprise, then, when he turned quietly as if about to pass away? That he would do so after so open an insult seemed a wonderful thing.

But, just as he turned, Bruce Arden sprung forward, with outstretched fingers, that tightened like a vise on the throat of Geyser Joe. Like steel seemed the muscles of the young man, as he tore his burly antagonist from his feet, flung him to the ground and knelt upon his shoulders.

"Now, will you tell me?" he growled, with his hand still upon Geyser Joe's throat. It was the most utter surprise to every one there, and to no one more than to Burke, who had not thought of a personal assault, and knew intuitively that Arden did not intend to draw a weapon.

But the man was something of the nature of a foot-ball. He had been knocked about so often and come out unhurt, that he was not alarmed, even now. In fact, he was rather accustomed to getting the worst of it in the send-off, and he knew exactly what to do when he happened to find himself the under dog in a fight.

For a moment he was down upon his back, with Bruce Arden kneeling on his shoulders; in another moment he was upon his feet, seizing the young man as he rose. There scarcely seemed to be a struggle even, but just a single great wave of strength, that sent Arden flying through the air, straight into the door of the Star.

And then, after the body of the flying youth, rushed Geyser Joe, with a score of High Piners in his wake. There was an intermingling of forms, a confusion of voices, and the spiteful, angry crack of two revolvers, followed by the heavy fall of a body.

At that John Duke, who had contented himself with a simple glance through the open door, manifested a disposition to go in. He pushed and struggled, and at last made good his entrance into the room.

It was just as he had expected. In one corner of the room lay Bruce Arden, while Geyser Joe stood with his back against the wall, holding at bay a dozen ravening men.

CHAPTER VIII.

DANDY DARKE STEPS INTO COURT.

WHEN Geyser Joe and Argado dismounted in front of the Star, that part of the train that belonged to the Go-Down Mine passed along through the town, thus leaving Burke alone in the midst of his enemies.

But Argado, did not linger, or seek to renew his quarrel, and if it had not been for the unfortunate meeting with Bruce Arden there might have been no trouble, for that time, at least.

The Mexican entered the large room that was the saloon proper; but he did not linger there. Passing through the door upon the opposite side, he found himself in a smaller room. It was simply a shed, built against the main building, and apparently for the storage of odds and ends; but in one corner, hidden from the eye of a passer through by a pile of empty boxes, was an opening descended by a ladder, down which Alan Argado went, like a man who well knew the way.

It would have been a surprise to the greater part of the inhabitants of High Pine if they could have followed the Mexican, for the room underneath the Star was nearly as large, was better furnished, and nearly as well filled. Lights were burning upon the walls, and upon a rough counter in one corner of the room which was a fac-simile of the bar in the room below.

"Well, Alan Argado, what have you to re-

port?" was the query of a tall, burly man, dressed in a rough costume of velveteen pantaloons, red flannel shirt, broad-brimmed hat that once had been white, and heavy boots.

"Not much, Captain Dick, Joe Burke lives; is up yonder now. He bears a charmed life, and bullet nor steel will kill him."

"Then yer orter know'd it afore yer took out ther contract. We kin kill him in High Pine any day, but that don't suit our hand. Ef ther camp gits too hard they'll run in the sojers; an' onless we make a clean sweep of the hull crowd at the Go-Down ther balance will hold on, an' whar will we be? Curses on your cowardly Mexican heart, you haven't got ther sand. Thet's what's ther matter."

"I've all ther sand for such a job that any other man has; and I have sworn to have my revenge on them all for my brothers that they slew, among them; but once my pistol missed fire, and then again, when my knife was just at his throat, a woman saved him."

"A woman?"

"Yes. Raquel, my daughter."

"What business had she chipping in? What did you mean bringing her along?"

"Ask her. She's a wildcat when she starts; and for some reason of her own she vowed to come to High Pine. I couldn't stop her, then; she would have come through, if all the Hawks stood in line to bar her out. What she wants I don't know, but most likely she wants to be revenged."

"You'd better take her out of the way if you don't want her hurt. We don't want any woman fooling round hyer. That's your lookout; we want to know what you're goin' to do about the job."

"I'm going to run the thing through. He's up-stairs now, and I'll show you if I have sand or not."

As he spoke Argado touched the revolver in his belt with a menacing gesture and turned away.

"The fool means business, boys; we'll hev to see he don't git himself inter a hole. He's quick on ther trigger, but it takes a mighty spry man to git away with Geyser Joe, an' there's men in High Pine that's ready to back Burke, er any of ther Go-Down crowd ef they happen to be 'round. But mebbe our chance hes come."

The crowd turned toward the low door, when suddenly, above, they heard the muffled report of two revolvers, and with one accord all rushed out and up.

Meantime, John Duke had forced his way into the saloon and chipped into the fray there going on with ready, careless coolness. The first thing he saw was a man, cocking a revolver and dropping it toward an aim over the shoulder of one who stood in front of him. This man was Alan Argado, at last about to get in his work.

With a quick bound the vagabond was upon him, throwing up his arm with one hand, while, with the other, he swung him over his knee, and then tore the pistol from his relaxing fingers, though not before one shot had wasted itself, driving through the roof overhead.

"Down in front, thar!" he shouted, and gathering up the Mexican, with a firm gripe on his

collar and the slack of his unmentionables, he slung him around and discharged him like a catapult at a squad of men who seemed about to throw themselves upon Burke.

The living projectile cleared the way most effectually, besides creating a diversion. As the fight had not yet begun, people still had time to look around and see what new factor it was that was entering into the game. While they looked, Duke ranged up alongside of Geyser Joe.

"Go fur 'em, pard, they mean biz. Ef yer drops yer hackles now you's a dead rooster."

"I'm not a-keerin' fur any sich crowd, meself, er any two sich crowds; but I don't want to set High Pine to buckin' ag'in' my pards. Ez fur thet boy, I never tetch'd him."

At this latter declaration John Duke whistled softly, and raised his eyebrows; but he had no time to pursue the subject further. His animated ten-pins were up and shouting, and though no direct attack was made for a minute there was some lively talk. At the very moment that Duke imagined the excitement was going to culminate in an attack, the floor immediately in their front was swept clear as if by magic, leaving an open space, while a harsh, stern voice exclaimed:

"Joe Burke, drop those muzzles. It's time we found out in High Pine who's running this town. If it's Geyser Joe, we want to know if he's doing it on the square; and if it's the people, they'll have a word or two to say about killing a man in cold blood."

"And who are you that wants to take ther deal? I'm not running this town; but I reckon you ain't running me. Ef ary galoot hyer wants to ask questions let him put up his shootin' irons, an' hyer's ther pair to answer 'em."

"Never mind who I am; perhaps I'm Judge Lynch. There's been nothing but riot and murder, and men for breakfast, until there's scarcely enough left to weep in the graveyard. We say this thing has got to be stopped, and we may as well begin it with you. You're charged with murder, Joe Burke; with shooting a man down because of an old grudge against him. What do you say, guilty or not guilty?"

"I say, this ain't no court, an' you ain't no judge, an' I ain't no pris'ner. I say ye'r' settin' up a game ag'in' me. Now go on with yer deal. As fer you, stranger, mebbe you'd better hold out. When this ruction begins, me er my friends might furgit which side ye'r' on, an' salivate yer by mistake."

"Thankee fur nothin', but ef you don't begin, this ain't goin' to be much of a row, anyhow. Why, these fellows in High Pine are lambs; they are regular lambs."

"And who are you?" said the man who had suggested that he might be Judge Lynch, turning quickly to the vagabond, and eying him with a stern, though suspicious look.

"John, Duke of Denmark; ef it's any satisfaction to know. I'm backing up my old side pardner hyer fur all I'm worth. Now, ef this fun's to go on, rustle 'round a bit; an' ef it's all chin-chin, simmer down. You hear me?"

At this bold defiance on the part of a perfect stranger there was an ominous silence. Two resolute men, brave enough to hold their fire

until the last minute, and then ready to walk straight into work, were to be handled with some care, since this riot was being stirred up in cold blood.

The fact that Captain Dick and his followers seemed inclined to make Burke stand the farce of a trial made the affair all the more awkward. The crowd hesitated; and while it hesitated through the open door there quietly glided a young man with a soft, pantherish step, who gave a keen glance around, first at the two men, and then at the dozen ranged against them.

He was a young man, but it did not take more than one look into his handsome face to know that he was a determined one, that had lived his life and learned his lessons in a rough school. He contrasted strangely with his surroundings, since he alone made any pretension to dress. Clad in black, with a long feather wreathed around his sombrero, and his long hair floating down over his shoulders in an ebon wave, he looked little like the leading spirit and prime worker in the Go-Down shaft. Yet it was Dave Dorland, better known in High Pine as Dandy Darke of Angels.

So quiet had been his entrance that the first intimation had of his presence was the hearing of his question, shortly and sharply spoken:

"Got you corraled, have they, Joe? what does this mean?"

Captain Dick turned like a flash at the unwelcome sound; but the sight of Dandy Darke, cool and smiling, with his hands resting on his hips, and just ready to grasp his weapons, was by no means reassuring. There were six revolvers to face, now, instead of two, with a possibility of the whole Go-Down crowd being within striking distance.

Still numerical strength was with Dick; and the men behind him were as rough and reckless and well tried as any in the town, so he answered with some show of coolness:

"It means this: Some of us have been talkin' matters up an' made out that it's time High Pine was better regulated. There's been a hundred men shot in this camp an' nobody said a word. We just said that hereafter we'd look sich things up, an' if anybody war to blame go fur 'em, er if not say so an' there'd be no more bother. Geyser Joe ain't no better nor any other man. He's killed a young tenderfoot, an' we want to know what he did it fur. If he ain't got a good square reason we'll hang him as soon as any one else."

"Maybe you'd hang him a little sooner, if you had the chance; but Joseph won't stretch a rope this evening. I want him. Besides, he don't shoot around promiscuous. Where's this man he killed: and what started the trouble?"

As Dandy Darke asked the question he looked around; and so did the rest. Where was the man that was killed? Bruce Arden had disappeared.

"He was right thar," answered Captain Dick, with some hesitation. "Thar's his blood on the floor. Some one must have carried ther corpus out. What we want to know is if Geyser Joe, hyer, is goin' to stand his trial like a man, er whether we've got to drop him in his tracks an' hold an inquest."

"Geyser Joe ain't takin' any stock in High

Pine justice; he's bin thar. Ef yer want to go through the motions sail on with yer trial an' when ye'r' through I'll let yer know ef I approve ther findin's of ther court. Ef that don't suit, as I tole yer afore, wade in."

But as Burke closed his speech there was an interruption from without:

"Hunky dunky, that's my name, 'way up! I'm ther Red Sport, an' ugly on ther shoot."

And just before these words there was a crack of a revolver.

CHAPTER IX.

LOST LALAREE—A DOUBT IN THE CASE.

IT is time to go back to Lalaree and her captors. She had been so thoroughly surprised that there was no opportunity for resistance until it would have been simply throwing her life away to have made even a hostile gesture. Hardly had her feet touched the ground, when her brawny captor removed her revolvers from her belt, and thrust them into his own, and then deftly bound her wrists together.

"Now Brown Bird come with Winnemakma, great Apache chief. Maybe he let her go; maybe he take her scalp. Dunno. See, bi'mby, soon. Walk!"

It seemed a singular thing to Lalaree, who knew something of Indian habits, that all these warriors should be on foot and that they should turn the head of her mustang northward and then start him off at a rattling pace down the mountain-side, but in a few minutes she learned something more of their intentions. Without doubt they had a lurking-place somewhere near High Pine, and had no intentions of making a hasty or a distant retreat. On the contrary they moved away quite at their leisure, plunging at once into the very thicket from which she had so lately emerged.

Lalaree was in doubt what to do. Though by a stern gesture she had been warned to keep silence, she questioned herself whether it would be better to put the Indians upon the trail of the wounded man, or whether he would be safer if left to his own devices. While she doubted, she saw one of the red-men halt suddenly, and point downward. There was a little splotch of blood upon the ground, and his quick eye had seen it.

The band at once divided, half remaining with Lalaree, the other half following the trail that had been thus indicated. Though the traces of footsteps were but faint they could be seen, and in a few minutes the two parties had diverged so far as to be invisible to each other.

It was a long and tiresome march for a girl to take, weakened as she was by the excitement of the past hour, and the suspense she endured, not only as to her own fate but concerning that of the young man for whom she had vainly risked so much.

Night was near at hand, also, and the gashes and gulches in the mountain-side were growing darker and colder. Where was this journey to end?

The answer came at last.

From some concealed spot among the bushes at the mouth of a narrow ravine or canyon, that was cut cleanly and deep, there came a sudden shout of "Halt!"

At that the Apaches stood stock still, save that the leader uttered a low cry, that sounded something like the booming note of a night-hawk. Then he moved forward, with his hands held in the air above his head.

What passed between the two Lalaree could not hear; but after a momentary delay the march was again resumed, though not for much further. Into the ravine they turned, and before going many yards the flare of a small campfire could be seen, and a dozen dark forms flitting about. Then the girl knew that she was in the nest of the Hawks of High Pine. What was to be the next discovery?

As she came up toward the fire the noise of the approaching footsteps attracted the attention of the men, who peered anxiously down the ravine, and one of their number stepped forward, with his hand on his revolver.

A glance, however, reassured him, and he halted, while again the leading brave went forward alone, and the two held a whispered conversation, in which there was evidently some reference made to the prisoner, as well as to the wounded man who was wandering somewhere upon the mountain-side.

Forward stepped the man, a burly, rough-and-ready-looking villain, and with an over-strained ceremony that was almost ludicrous, full of mockery as it was, he offered his hat and bowed low before Lalaree.

"Make yourself at home hyar, miss. We're glad to see any one from the Go-Down. Fact is we ruther expect a visit from yer friends, afore we get through with 'em. There's some leetle matters fur settlement, es maybe you may be rememberin'; an' ther Hawks hes a straightforward honest way ov payin' the'r debts. Sorry we didn't know you was a-comin' er we'd pervised more comfortable quarters; but we'll do ther best we kin, an' I think you'll like 'em so well you won't want to leave soon. An' ef yer do I can't see it'll make much difference."

"I can give you fair warning," quietly responded Lalaree. "So far you outlaws that call yourselves the Hawks, have had it all your own way because High Pine men are too nearly on your own grade to care to ferret you out; but if you choose to quarrel with the men of the Go-Down shaft, you will find out what it is to have an enemy on your trail. I make no threats nor promises, only I warn you that strict justice will be meted out to you for your deeds. Harm me if you dare!"

She drew herself up proudly and looked the outlaw firmly in the face.

Even he seemed a little abashed.

"I'm not the boss of this thing, miss, though the men do call me Captain Dick. Ef I hed my choice I don't say that I'd meddle with you, but we've agreed to run the thing through, an' I guess we kin carry the contract. Till the boss does come in I'll see that you're treated es squar' es we know how, pervised yer don't put on too many airs. Make yerself at home over yonder. I'll see that you hev some grub. I reckon ye'r hungry."

The man pointed with his hand toward a rude shelter built against the rock, in front of which was blazing a small fire.

"But, see! You will unbind my hands? And

the Indians who captured me, certainly you do not mean that you will leave me as their prisoner?"

"Yer hands may as well stay that way a leetle while longer. I've heerd that you was a trifle handy with weepons, an' it's best not to make mistakes. Es fur ther Apaches, they's very handy pards ov ourn, an' they ain't goin' to give yer any more trouble, so you kin rest easy about them. What the boss will say when he comes in is somethin' else. But I'll give yer fair warnin', too. Ther first move to git away, an' yer a dead damsel. You hear me!"

He motioned again, this time with an impatient gesture, and Lalaree turned away. Whatever might be the chances of this captivity, she would meet them with dignity and courage.

Half an hour later she started up at hearing a sentinel's challenge and the cry of the night-hawk. Watching with eager interest she saw, coming into camp, the missing Apaches, and between them they supported the drooping form of the wounded man, Bruce Arden.

At sight of him she gave a little cry. When she would have gone to her own death in silence she could not hide her concern for him.

Yet she noted, even at the distance, that there was still a good deal of strength in his step, and a glad-hope sprung up in her heart that he might not be seriously injured.

Whether he was or was not, however, it was at least certain that he was a prisoner like herself, and in danger, and from the moment she saw that he had fallen into the hands of the enemy she began puzzling her woman's wits how to save him.

Though twenty-five or thirty yards away, she could see that he was by no means badly treated, and that the outlaws seemed to think of him more as a human being in distress than as a prisoner out of whom some possible profit was to be made.

The fact that he was neither bound, nor placed under guard, had a dampening effect upon the spirits of Lalaree for a time; but she reassured herself when she thought that the prisoner might have the wit to feign a worse condition than really existed. If such were the case it would be a great advantage in the game that she had decided to attempt to play.

She gave no sign of what was passing in her mind, but waited her chance patiently, and for a long time. The hours wore on. Darkness at last reigned in the camp; and silence.

Then at last she began to act; the Indian blood in her veins served her well. She was as sinuous as a serpent; as cautious as the Apaches, who lay sound asleep at the further end of the camp. Already she had succeeded in unfastening her hands, and having decided that the time had come, she glided like a shadow along the rocky wall of the canyon, and only halted when she stood by the side of her fellow prisoner.

He seemed to be sleeping both soundly and sweetly.

She gazed down into his face long and earnestly, with clasped hands and, an earnest look. The flickering light of the distant fire enabled her to catch but faint and occasional glances, but it seemed to her that now there could be no

mistake, though the bandage across his forehead concealed so much of his features.

She caught him by the shoulder and shook him gently.

"Bruce!" she whispered. "Bruce Arden!"

In an instant he awakened with a start.

"What is it?"

The question was given in a fine, clear voice, distinctly audible, and with little trace of confusion or weakness. As she heard it, Lalaree cowered back, crouching to the ground with her hands covering her face.

"That voice! My heavens, it is *not* Bruce Arden!"

"My darling," came the answer. "Can you doubt me?"

CHAPTER X.

RED SPORT ON THE TRAIL.

LALAREE, or Maud Burke, as she was called, after Joseph Burke, who had been, for years, her father by adoption, lived at the Go-Down shaft with the beautiful Marion, wife of Dave Dorland. How the Go-Down Company came to be formed, is too long a story to tell here. Suffice it to say, that the two girls had swung together in a time of danger and trial, and had been knit together in closest friendship. Both had suffered much, but now, spite of their lonely location in the midst of savage lawlessness, they had begun to be reasonably happy; and would perhaps have been more so had all communication with the outside world been cut off.

The enemies around them had lain quiescent so long, and High Pine had doffed its hat so respectfully to the trio of men who were running the Go-Down, that they no longer thought of serious danger, and even Dave Dorland was somewhat off of his guard.

The Red Sport, it is true, seemed to acquiesce in this order of things, but he moved around none the less silently, with his sharp black eyes glowing with suspicions, and his ears open to catch the slightest hint of trouble ahead. Once or twice he whispered a caution to Lalaree, for she was his granddaughter, the daughter of Scarlet Dove and a white chief of the Sioux, though she had fallen into the hands of the man now known as Geyser Joe, at the time of a massacre of a camp, where, as a child, she had been temporarily left by Scarlet Bear. In that massacre, the father and mother of Dave Dorland had been slain, and on the slayers he had taken a terrible revenge, which, however, embroiled him with the outlaws around High Pine.

The absence of Lalaree was not noticed for some hours until the shades of night were dropping down over the mountain. She was absent so often in her long rides, though generally in company with Burke or Scarlet Bear, that this afternoon no one had paid any attention to the fact that she had slipped away.

Near dark Red Sport came gliding in; and before long he was making inquiries concerning her. When he found that she had not been seen in or around the stockade for some hours, he said nothing, but taking his rifle, lariat, and revolvers, went away.

Though it was now after sundown, he made

some progress that night. A few questions, carefully worded, elicited information that sent him through High Pine; but then he was at fault, and all he could do for the present was to wander down the mountain-trail.

Even that chanced to be of some use, since, some miles down, he came upon the mustang that Maud usually rode, wandering idly about.

He caught the animal without much trouble, recognized it, and, mounting, threw the reins over its neck, spoke to it gently, and allowed it to choose its own course.

It carried him straight toward High Pine, for a time, and then quietly turned aside for a few yards and halted.

This action of the sagacious brute was not thrown away upon the rider. He guessed at once that this was the spot where Lalaree had dismounted, and though it was too dark to obtain positive evidence, he felt that he had reached one end of the trail that he would take up at the first gleam of the morning, if meantime nothing was heard from the missing girl.

Probably any other man would have gone back and hunted up assistance; but Red Bear had his own way of doing business, and preferred to rely upon himself, at least until he found out just how the land lay. From the moment that he had found the riderless mustang he believed that the girl had fallen into the hands of an enemy. If such was the case, one man was better than a dozen. The one man might slip along unperceived; but a dozen would surely be seen, and if the men he was after once got to running, it was hard to say whether they would ever be overtaken.

There was a great deal of sense in this idea; and the result fully justified Red Sport's course. After a long and toilsome tracking of the faint trail that he discovered, he finally found himself lying on a ledge of rocks just above the outlaws' camp in the canyon.

"Waugh! Red Sport got Hawks on a string now, sure. Big thing hyer. Much diggin's up kenyon; an' heap chance to scoop 'em on ther trail. Keep eyes open now, mebbe see chance take 'em in. Younder Lalaree all hunky dumpy. You bet. Waugh!"

Sure enough, below him he could see Lalaree. She was standing silently looking toward a young man who was propped up against the rock, at a spot immediately below where the Indian was peering from between two boulders. By his side stood several men, and they conversed together in a tolerably low tone.

Red Sport had eyes and ears that were sharp to see and to hear. Another man in his place might have received only a blurred and faint impression of what was going on below; but he was exceptionally keen; and perhaps he guessed a good deal.

One of the men talking was dressed in the garb of an Apache, and who else but Red Bear would, at the first glimpse have pronounced him a fraud? Yet even before he caught snatches of his conversation the Red Sport had muttered:

"Hum! Him got red paint and feathers, but him no got red skin. Hyer's ther game ther Hawks set up on High Pine. Reckon I'll chip in, bluff big game, bime-by, scon."

So he listened without much surprise to hear snatches of their talk.

"Ye'r' right, Cap. Ther' never wer'n't a bigger failure; an' it wer'n't our fault, neither. They jist snatched us bald-headed," the mock Apache was saying. "It wa'n't judgment, but blind luck that the hull of our boys didn't waltz right in out ov ther wet. It happened they struck ther real red-skins fu'st; an' by ther time they were slaughtered we'd sense enough to git back outer range."

"But how did it happen that they surprised you so completely?" queried the reclining man, who had a bandage over his forehead. He spoke in a low, weak tone, and yet the sibilant words reached the sharp ears above.

"I'll never tell. They jist riz up behind us an went through like a roarin' thunder ov destruction. We shot, an' yelled, an' then run away. Ef we'd run away fu'st thar might 'a' bin enough on us left to hav tried another hitch at 'em, but we didn't, an' that's the way Geyser Joe an' his train is comin' safe inter High Pine."

What answer was made to this, the Red Sport did not hear; but the mock Apache continued:

"Ef yer gathered the boys all together, an' rustled 'round lively, you might head 'em off somewhere among the gulches in ther ten-mile cut-off. I seen yer Mexican, but he hedn't got in his work yit, an' I reckon that's what ailed the mule; but he said thar war a fortune in ther train."

"Thar's biz in that," here interposed the deep voice of Captain Dick. "Say the word and I'll git ther crowd together, an' ef you want to run this little game of yours through, I'll try my hand at him. Curse this Geyser Joe! One or the other of us two will have to hop the twig soon."

"No," said the recumbent man, thoughtfully. "He has his eyes open now, and can't be taken off his guard. What couldn't be done with a couple dozen red-skins to back us, can't be done without them. And it is bad policy to throw yerself into a desperate game just because you hate the man on the other side. Wait! wait a few days, and you shall have all the chance in the world to be revenged on Burke."

"All right; but it seems to me to be pretty much talkee-talk. If it wa'n't fur that little black-eyed thing over yonder, that was goin' to kerry you away last night, whether you wanted it er not, I think you might look at it different. We won't grumble, though. Even Faro Frank wants his little amusement."

As he ceased speaking he uttered a hoarse laugh, and then walked away.

"He's mistaken!" said the other, in a reassuring tone. "I know yer better than that; but I would like to know when you're goin' to act. We all know yer head's jist level; but fur all that some on us get mighty tired waiting."

"That is jest what I want you to go and arrange. Wash off that paint and clear away that toggery. I want you to be at the Go-Down shaft to-night about nine, so as to fix it all up. I'll give you the signals and points."

"And what er you goin' to do? I allow you ain't goin' to lie 'round hyer loose, fur nothin'."

"Oh, I'm going in to High Pine. In this toggery there's no one going to recognize me, and Dick and I will meet some of the boys there. I won't go till a little late, though. If I can draw the wool over the girl's eyes it will be a point made."

Here the conference broke up; but the Red Sport had heard enough to give him several ideas about how the land lay, and he shrunk back into a convenient hiding-place to ponder over his plans for the future.

CHAPTER XI.

THE RED SPORT CHIPS IN.

It had certainly not been the intention of the Hawks to allow Lelaree access to the man with the bandaged head; and though she had not been able to detect the fact she had all along been under surveillance. And whether or no she had taken the young man off of his guard she had no further chance to judge, since, at the very time he was muttering, "Can you doubt me?" two dark forms darted upon them, one placing his hand upon the mouth of him she still more than half believed was Bruce Arden, while the other flung a powerful arm around her waist, and carried her, without a word, back to her former quarters.

Then he deliberately produced his revolver, and, in an undertone, growled out:

"That one time. Don't want shoot leetle squaw till boss come, but next time shoot sure; squaw keep still or die. Promise quick, eh?"

The threat was not to be disregarded; and it seemed to her that for the present, she had lost her chance for escape. She could not climb the solid, straight wall of rock, on the sides; and both above and below her, in the canyon, were the watchful Hawks. She saw, now, that escape was something to be carefully planned, with a more thorough knowledge of the ground; and perhaps the chance of rescue by her friends was better.

"For to-night I promise to make no more effort to change my quarters. And I did not think to escape. I saw one that I believed I knew, wounded and suffering, and I tried to go to him, to aid him if he needed aid. I shall not attempt it again. I will sleep and gather strength; who knows how soon I may need it?"

She flung herself down, somewhat sullenly; still under the belief that the man who menaced her was an Apache. He withdrew quietly; and in a little while the girl seemed to be in a deep slumber.

The next day came and passed with horrible monotony. From a distance she contemplated her fellow prisoner, if such he was; and doubted and hoped. Once when she was looking straight at him, he glanced warily around, and then gave her a gesture which was at once a warning and an assurance. After that he made but little sign of curiosity or sympathy.

Meantime she was treated with a careless good-nature that began insensibly to reassure her; and that probably removed the inducement to risk desperate chances. The night drew near, and as yet she had done nothing.

As she stood alone, just under the wall of the

canyon, something dropped at her feet with a light thud. She looked around and saw no one near. Then her quick eye searched the ground.

She found what had startled her. It was a little fragment of stone, that did not weigh more than half an ounce, enveloped in a fragment of gayly flowered calico that she recognized in an instant.

At sight of that she knew that Mato Luta was somewhere near, and was more hopeful than ever, though none the less keenly on the watch. Something would happen before very long.

But the darkness deepened, and the hours wore on, and her friends gave no further sign. Several times she thought she made out dark forms moving away; but she could not be certain. She did not even know how many were left around her, though, without doubt there was a stronger guard than she could overcome. At sundown a hideous-looking old squaw, that had been detailed to act as her especial body-guard, came and tied her hands and knees as a precaution against any such movement as had been made the night before, and then went away.

Lalaree waited until she was tired of waiting and tried to force herself to go to sleep. She closed her eyes, breathed heavily, and had almost succeeded, when she heard a slight rustling near her. In an instant she was wide awake.

"Maud!"

She heard some one call her name in a low tone; and the voice was unfamiliar. Whether it was friend or foe she preferred to keep silent; only she continued her long-drawn breathing.

Then a man came crawling to her side. He touched her shoulder lightly; and now, as she no longer had any excuse, she gave a start.

With a knife he quietly cut the cords that bound her.

"It is I, Arden; do not be afraid. I only have a moment that I dare spend with you now. I am living and I will save you. There is some kind of a mystery here, and I have taken advantage of it. I will explain all when we are out of this gang's clutches. For the present we are secure from any harm, and in the future we will yet be happy. You might have brought me harm last night, but that is all right now. We must run no risk until the time comes to act. We must part now. Good-by."

While he spoke, this man drew her toward him, and she now, in the dim light seemed to see a familiar form, and his hasty words were filling her soul with hope; yet she cowered away from him, full of doubt and suspicion.

"Let me go. You are not a living man. You are a corpse, brought to life with another soul. I risked all to save you; and now I doubt you. Go away. You are not—you are not Bruce Arden!"

"But I am, come here to avenge you, not knowing that you lived. Listen. I sought Murray Brandt's life. He it was that struck me down, and, as I thought, spirited you away. I sought long and eagerly for you, and when I could not find you, I took up his trail. That, by chance, led to High Pine and to you."

"But that woman! what was she to you? Who was she? I saw you aim a shot at her, and

upon your forehead the mark of her bullet. Are you false to her and to me, Bruce Arden, or not? Are you a villain?"

"For the woman, I know her not. She seems to be a wild, mad Mexican girl, who tried to fasten herself upon me. Whether she mistook me for some one else, or whether her brain is altogether crazed I know not; but it is plain that she must be thanked not only for my danger, but for yours. Surely you would not doubt me on her account? And yet, gracious Heaven! you must; or else why this coolness?"

Words and tone pleaded strongly for him. When he cowered back with his face in his hands Lalaree was ready to blow her doubts and fears to the winds. Her heart began to speak in his favor and she no longer shrunk away. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps it was the remembrance of the Mexican girl, rankling in her breast, that destroyed what should have been the perfect bliss of this meeting. In another moment she would have been conquered. She even moved a step toward him.

Just then the man was suddenly torn from his feet and cast to the ground. He could not even call out, for a gripe of prodigious power was on his throat, and he knew that he was in the hands of a master, who, unless his apparent design was speedily altered, would choke him to death, then and there.

It was not the intention of the Red Sport, however, to go to such extremes. When satisfied that the man was sufficiently impressed with his power and purpose he relaxed the grasp of his fingers a little, and placed at his head his pistol.

"Scarlet Bear play this game out now. You just whisper once, an' off yer goes to the happy hunting-ground. You hear me, eh?"

The answer was a faint little nod.

Still in his coarse whisper the Red Sport continued:

"Me sling down lariat and stand behind. Hear all talk. Mebbe square sport, mebbe not. Dunno, an' don't care. Take yer both right inter High Pine. Ef ye'r' square, all hunky-dunk. Ef bad man, waugh! Cut um throat an' raise 'um hair. You hear me, eh?"

There was little doubt on that score. As he spoke Scarlet Bear involuntarily tightened his gripe again, and the man shuddered under it as though he felt a spasm of approaching death.

"Ef you move, er whisper, er any one comes, kill yer right away, just fur fun. Come, little red girl, we git out now, mighty quick, soon. Rope jist little 'long ther rock. Lalaree find it an' waltz up. Mato Luta come 'long then, and bring white galoot. She find out who he is then, mebbe."

Through it all the girl had not spoken a word. She had confidence in Red Sport, and just now, very little in herself. She dared not interfere. She followed his orders without hesitation, found the lariat down which he had so silently come, and began its ascent with all the ease of a practiced gymnast, though the task was one to try the strongest muscles.

Through the camp everything was strangely silent. Had she known that the majority of the Hawks could have been found in or near

High Pine, she might have understood it better. Once or twice she looked downward, half-expecting that Red Sport would be dimly seen, with his back to the wall, facing a host of foes.

But no interruption came, and at last, tired, breathless, and with blistered hands, she swung herself over the edge of the rock, and lay safe on the flat floor above.

When Red Sport saw that Lalaree was safely over the rock he turned to his prisoner with a dubious grin on his marked features.

"Ugly climb there; heap ugly drop, you bet. Kill you just soon es not, an' drop afterwards. Mind. First cheep, in go white man's checks. Fix you now so carry you up."

For once the man attempted speech, but from his throat there came only a low, gurgling sound, for Scarlet Bear had deftly gagged him as soon as he had fairly taken his fingers from his throat. But at the sound, low though it was, up came a knife.

"Don't do so some more; heap danger, don't I told yer, eh?"

Then he corded the hands and feet of his prisoner together, and making a loop of rope slung him over his shoulder and laid hold of the lariat. With all this burden on his back he was going to try the ascent.

"Ef ary thing drops, Scarlet Bear there too. Umph! Big pull--but big Injun at ther rope."

It was a big pull, a terrible pull, but the brawny arms of the Red Sport were equal to the task. In the descent he had carefully felt the face of the rock, and on the return journey he found many places where he could obtain a foothold, and so relieve the prodigious strain upon his muscles.

Whatever the feelings of the captive may have been, he had no chance to express them; but it was without doubt a relief when at last Lalaree, having reached out a hand to help them over the perilous ending of their ascent, the two were once more on *terra firma*.

"Now Red Sport takes outfit to High Pine. Come along. See what's up. Lalaree hunky-dunk; an' ef you don't like Scarlet Bear, go fur him, eh?"

He loosened the bandages upon the ankles of his prisoner and started the procession.

He knew his objective point well enough, now; and so, by taking a direct route saved distance and found an easier path. As a result, he struck High Pine, prisoner and all, just at the time that Captain Dick was getting ready for a difficulty with Geyser Joe and his pards.

If it had been possible to have done so he would probably have flanked High Pine altogether, and gone direct to the Go-Down; but that was impracticable, unless he had taken a much longer route, from the canyon of the Hawks; and he was desirous of saving Lalaree as much as possible.

He did not doubt but that he could run the gantlet of the town successfully, and probably he would have done so had it not been for the excitement at the "Star," which was just beginning to draw a crowd thither. Even then he might have passed through had it not been for Lalaree, whose quick eye saw something that Red Sport would not have cared to notice. From the "Star" a little group was coming

quietly away. First a woman, leading the way; and then two men, bearing between them the body of a third. As they passed the light that streamed from a window something familiar in the movements of this woman struck Lalaree. She halted a moment and gazed with a troubled look at the crowd; then darted forward, as her glance fell upon the limp form of the man who was being carried. Like a flash she seemed to recognize the two whom she had seen the previous afternoon on the plain below High Pine. Here was another phase of the mystery that she was so anxious to solve, and bounding in front of the four she held up her hands, with a gesture summoning them to halt.

"Stop! Who are you? What is the meaning of this? I must know more before you go another step."

Raquel, the Mexican girl, faced her with a scowl upon her handsome features.

"Stand aside. Who are you to interfere? Would you have him murdered, here and now?"

"Woman, I am Bruce Arden's friend. I saw you try to slay him but yesterday. Do you think I would see you drag him off to his death? Never! Give him to me; he is mine!"

As she spoke she sprung past Raquel, and threw her arms about the neck of the man, who, even at her touch, seemed to be electrified again into being.

"Ha!" exclaimed Raquel. "It is your handsome face, is it, that has won him from me? But you shall not triumph over me. He is mine again; and sooner than see him yours I would put a bullet through his brain, as I madly tried to do yesterday. No, I will save him from death and you. Come away and leave the pass before his foes find us and he is lost."

"His foes! Who are his foes? He is a stranger here."

"You are false. Geyser Joe is his mortal enemy; so are they all that train with him. Away!"

Maud looked from one to the other in amazement.

"It is you that are false. Geyser Joe shall be his friend to the death."

But Raquel would reason no longer. She sprung upon the Indian girl, with an unexpected bound, and hurled her aside.

"Quick! Run with him! Hide him as I told you, while I hold these at bay!"

And so speaking, she whipped out a revolver and faced Red Sport, Lalaree, and the crowd beyond, that had already begun to gather.

As she held her pistol poised there came a strange and unexpected interruption. Like a tiger a strange figure sprung upon her. It was a man, mowing and jabbering, with a gag in his mouth, a bandage around his head, his face fairly livid with rage. From her hand he snatched her weapon, as an angry man might snatch a plaything from a child, and, wheeling, he dropped the muzzle straight for the breast of the Red Sport, raising the hammer of the pistol as it fell into line.

Yet just as he pulled the trigger Lalaree gave a lightning stroke at his arm, and the bullet went wide of its mark, while the Red Sport, a second later, held the drop on his almost escaped

prisoner, shouting the words with which a previous chapter was closed.

And shout and shot pretty thoroughly emptied the Star saloon.

CHAPTER XII.

WHICH IS WHICH?

DANDY DARKE had recognized the voice of the Red Sport, and leaped with the rest of the crowd. In fact he outran it, and was the first to see the strange tableau outside.

But by this time there had been another change in affairs, for Lalaree scarcely had seen that the bullet intended for Scarlet Bear had gone wide of its mark, and that it was about to be returned with deadly effect, when, utterly reckless of her own danger, she flung herself into the range of the Red Sport's weapon, catching with one hand the wrist of the late prisoner, while the other was raised in a warning gesture.

"Oh! wait, wait!" she exclaimed. "Somewhere there is a horrible mistake, or horrible treachery. We must know the truth before it is too late. One form, one face, one dress; but two hearts. Which is which?"

And then she turned suddenly to the man whose arm she grasped:

"Who are you, man or fiend; speak quickly?"

Without a doubt she had saved his life, for the finger of the Indian was just tightening on his trigger, and few indeed could have so suddenly changed the deadly thought and held their fire. He was one of the few, however, who could do it, and he did; although, as he saw the crowd come pouring out from the Star, he had an idea that he would have to fight the whole of High Pine. He believed it until he heard a harsh word or two, an oath, and the noise of a solid blow, just at the door of the Star. Giving a quick side-glance, he saw Dandy Darke and Joe Burke leaping for his side, and two men sprawling on the ground behind them.

"We're here, Red Bear! Say your say, and Go-Down is right behind you."

"That man's playin' off on Lalaree. Had her tied up in kenyun. Red Sport kerry both away. Want ter see who he is. Little squaw tie to me every time an' let me play hand, but hyer's another Jack, an' dunno which's trump. Take 'em both down to Go-Down an' see. Ef this bad man heap, hang um. Ef that big fraud, raise him hair. Give Lalaree right man, an' everything be hunky dinky. Eh?"

"All right then, that's the lay-out. Go-Down, sail in!"

From the crowd to the side of Darke and Geyser Joe stepped Joe Beams, a man of the shaft, and just in his wake came John Duke.

"Hyer, pards, let me chip in on your hand. Yer can't tell a boss by his harness, an' ye'll find me chock-full of sand. I used to run ther Go-Down meself till High Pine went back on me, an' an old dorg can't change his bark. Thet's whar I b'long."

As he spoke Duke ranged himself with the rest.

Meantime Lalaree had been waiting in breath-

less anxiety for that answer to her question which it seemed her words must wring from the man whose wrist she still clasped.

It came, in a low tone.

"Has not your heart told you? But, no! You have no heart. You too are in league with the men that hunger after my life. When you step aside, as you will, my death-warrant will be sealed. I who have suffered so much, who thought you dead, and risked all to avenge you, will die at last by your hand."

"If you are Bruce Arden, my Bruce Arden, who then is this other; and what to you is this Mexican girl, with her tigerish beauty?"

"She is nothing to me, but she may be much to him. And he is—"

As he was speaking, as he was about, perhaps, to reveal the secret that was holding in check the seething elements of war, there came a sudden interruption.

At his back appeared Captain Dick, who, seizing him by the neck with one hand, wrenched him from her grasp, while with the other hand he held the muzzle of a cocked revolver close to his face. At the same time one of his trusty men neatly performed the same operation upon the other Bruce Arden.

The two men, whoever and whatever they might be, were most evidently in the power, for life or death, of the savage Hawks.

"Now then, I reckon we hold the edge, an' ef you think twice I don't guess there's ary man that won't pass out an' leave us ther pot!" exclaimed Captain Dick.

"It's time to jump this game till we find out who's who; an' ary way we've got him. One of these chaps is this gal's friend, an' you can't get him away. Ef you tetch my arm, down goes ther hammer, an' off goes his brain-pan. Ef any one thinks he can shoot Bob there, so dead his finger can't pull ther trigger, *try it.*"

"But see here," interposed Dandy Darke, quietly. "I don't know much about this game, but I do see you're as apt to kill a friend of your own as a friend of ours. And disguised or not, that man is Faro Frank. Short hair, a smooth face and a boiled shirt can't change the man I whipped in a fair fight so that I can't tell him."

"Which man are those? Look ag'in, Mr. Darke. Ef you kin pick Faro Frank outer this pair you've got a sharper eye than any man in High Pine. Ef you think I've got him, blaze away an' see."

"He's talkin' right from ther bed rock, pard; hole yer hand," interposed Duke. "I know somethin' about this hyer game, but blessed ef I know them two apart. Cats in mittens can't ketch mice; an' they've got ther gloves on you, sure."

"Stranger, that's sense. Hyer's ther deal. You Go-Downers pack yer kits an' travel toward home; an' we'll take these two galoots an' draw off toward the other end ov town. You hold too many barrels fur us now to keer about a stiff fight, but ef that don't suit say it out an' we'll begin."

"Yes, yes, go!" exclaimed Lalaree. "Something tells me that these two will not harm each other; and if you come not to their terms it will be certain death. Yet, oh, if there was more

light, for one searching glance that should read not his face but his soul!"

As she spoke she turned toward the window of the Star, but at that moment the lights within were suddenly extinguished and the twilight without changed to a sudden darkness, in which Captain Dick led his captives away, while Dandy Darke and his crowd cautiously withdrew toward the Go-Down. Once more they had faced the tigers of High Pine; but this time the result was a drawn battle, and no lives lost.

And the outsiders of High Pine were somewhat disgusted, for they had imagined that when these two parties had so fairly faced each other nothing could come but a deadly duel. They did not entirely appreciate the fact that while all of these men were as reckless as, and perhaps more reckless than, any other men in High Pine, their very courage enabled them to view the chances coolly.

Captain Dick and his men knew that if the ball opened there would be a slaughter, for they could find no chance for a volley before the Go-Downers could be ready for them. And Dandy Darke and his friends knew as well that they were overmatched as regards numbers, that a melee meant death to the real Bruce Arden, in whom Lalaree had so deep an interest; and defeat meant the most terrible danger to both Lalaree and Marion Dorland who was now practically alone at the stockade at the Go-Down. Of course High Pine at large, except as spectators, cared little about the fray; and though more than one suspected that Captain Dick and his men were connected with the noted Hawks, no one thought it the correct thing to take sides against them.

But there was one thing that flashed across Dave Dorland's mind, so exciting him that he even took no time to reason concerning the return of the lately missing Lalaree.

"Come, this is no place to linger. This may be but a feint to hold us here, while the Go-Down is left alone. A dozen of the Hawks may be at work there now. Beams and I will ride on, and you follow as fast as you can come."

Dandy Darke's excitement was natural; but for once a foreboding brought no evil in its train, and it was with a feeling of happy relief that he found all quiet at home, and a little later welcomed the arrival of his friends.

In their wake, however, came John Duke.

"I don't want to wring in," was his cool remark, "but maybe ther climate ov High Pine is onhealthy fur a man about my size an' heft, an' I want a talk at yer, soon as we git where we kin take it easy."

"Take the risk, then, an' come along," answered Burke; and he came.

It was just in front of the gate in the stockade that he halted, and the partners were all there together.

"You've stood by me to-night, stranger, an' I reckon Go-Down will stand by you so long es you act ther clean thing; but you'll allow you're a mighty tough-looking case."

"That's accordin'. Ef you shuts yer eyes a white cow's black. When ther's a diffikility, John Duke's allers around, an' he takes one side er the t'other. It ain't hard to find him. To-

night he was on your side, an' ef you do the square thing he'll stay thar."

"That sounds like a threat," said Dave Dorland, suddenly stepping into the circle. "You are not as disinterested as you want to appear. What is your little game? Out with it. Who are you?"

"I'm John Duke, of Denmark; an' I'm the man that oughter own ther Go-Down shaft. I kin in yere when ther camp was young, an' me an' my pard put our muscle into the hole an' sot to cleaning out ther bones. It didn't pan out like we expected, but it war somethin' ov a strike, an' we'd 'a' done well, but High Pine one day riz right at us. My pard, they took right in outer the wet; an' they fired me out. I wasn't never very hand-ome, but when High Pine got through with me I war a pictur'. Ef I didn't die it warn't their fault, they did their best to give me a send-off."

"Well?"

"When I got round ag'in I drifted about some leetle consider'ble, an' all ther time I thort ov High Pine, an' how ef I hed it to do over ag'in, I'd make it lively fur ther boys. At last I stood right in fur ther spot. Fur ther time I've been hyer I've picked up a thunderin' lo' ov points, an' I'm a valyerble man. Buy me, an' I'll do yer good."

"We're coming to it at last. So you're for sale; what's your price?"

"I don't want to tread on yer toes too hard sence I've found out ther kinds of hair-pins you be. I did think I'd clean that shaft out an' set up fur a millionaire, but I won't go back on yer now. Es I understand what I heerd ther's about five on you claims an interest. Make it six, an' count John Duke in fur a full pard."

Dorland broke into a ringing laugh.

"That's coolness! Why not take the whole at once? You might as well."

"Thet's so, p'raps I oughter; but there's nothin' ov ther swine about me. I'd sooner hev everything all smooth an' agreeable than twice the dust an' no end ov trouble."

"You're too generous, by half. I don't think we need you. Of course we'll look after you tonight, but in the morning you'd better hoof it back to High Pine, and look for some other location."

"So you won't dicker?"

"Nary dicker."

"I kin give yer a p'in't right now, worth a half interest."

"Hang your points, and you, too! Come in. We can't stand here talking nonsense."

"Ef you think John Duke goes 'round talking nonsense, you don't know much. I mean what I say. By work an' diskiv'ry ther Go-Down is mine; I want a sixth interest."

"And you won't get it."

"Then you'll hear somethin' drop. I give yer all notice. I'm playin' a lone hand, right hyer, at High Pine; but I'm goin' to hold both bowsers and the ace. I've offered you your chance fur a deal, an' you threw it up. Now I tell yer, I'll take ther mine, an' you can do yer purtiest. You hear me? So long."

Without waiting for an answer, he turned and strode away, leaving the Go-Downers much puzzled at his strange assurance.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE STRENGTH OF A WOMAN'S LOVE.

It may seem strange that Alan Argado, with all his passionate Mexican blood, which had so long been hot for revenge, and now was heated to boiling point by the rough handling of Geyser Joe, should not have attempted some desperate deed, then and there. But, there were other hands guiding him, and he was but a simple tool, handled at will by the stern men who were bent at once upon revenge, and the possession of the Go-Down shaft, yet, at the same time were terribly anxious not to come into a conflict with the citizens proper of High Pine, who were just as apt to take up one side as the other, until it was clear who held the winning hand.

Argado, indeed, would have precipitated a fight in short order had he been allowed to work his will, but at the very moment he was about to spring upon Burke one of Captain Dick's men hurled him back.

"You fool!" he hissed. "Don't you see that High Pine is against us? When it comes to a fight, it's got to be where there's no witnesses. After it's over, trust High Pine to take things as they find 'em. Put up that knife or I'll drill you. You wouldn't do your work where you ought to have done it; you can't make a muss of it here."

The stern admonition was enforced by the production of a pistol; and Argado cowered back. Whatever might be his thirst for blood, he was not mad enough to face certain death. Thenceforth, even when Raquel so suddenly reappeared, he watched the proceedings in sullen silence, and it was only after Captain Dick and his men had suddenly swept away their two prisoners, that he thought of the girl whom he called his daughter, but who in reality was only so by marriage, being the child of his wife.

At times she passed his comprehension; but the events of this evening had somewhat opened his eyes, both to her plans, and to the actual feelings of the Hawks toward himself.

"Curse them!" he muttered. "They mean mischief to her and to me. Let Faro Frank beware, though! I can hate him as well as these others; and he is safer for me to strike."

From his gloomy soliloquy he was aroused by a light touch upon his shoulder.

He looked around quickly, suspicious of danger; but it was Raquel who stood behind him, still more silent and gloomy than himself.

"Come," she said, simply. "I have found a lair, and it is time we two trusted each other, for I have seen enough to know that our lives are in danger."

Without stopping to inquire how, upon such short notice, he had found a hiding-place, he suffered himself to be led away.

A not very long walk brought them to a hut standing alone upon the brink of the canyon to the west of the town. It was a small building, not much over a dozen feet square, but so solidly built of heavy slabs as to be almost a fort in miniature. The one window was defended by a heavy slab shutter, that was closed and barred on the inside, and in the sides were here and there the loop-holes that seemed to indicate that

the builder had considered the probability of having to stand a siege.

The inside was to the full as rough as the outside, and the furniture was sparse and poor, but it was not so bad a "lay-out" for High Pine, and Argado could not but admire the wit of the woman in having established herself so well; but he said nothing, while she lit a candle and doubly barred the door. It was Raquel who broke the silence.

"I deserve to be slain. Twice I have been deceived; but no such resemblance can fool me again."

"One of us, perhaps both, may never have the trial," answered Alan, moodily.

"Yes. Yet he loved me once, and his words were sweetest just before he left me. He is a traitor that I dare not trust, and yet I cannot forget."

"Why did you come here then? Why do you not go away?"

"Wait, wait! There is something for us in the future; I feel it."

As she spoke, there came a faint tapping at the door.

"Faro Frank's knock," she whispered. "Shall I slay him or shall I save him?"

"Unbar the door, and see."

She moved with nervous haste to the door, and flung it open.

"Well, little one, I've found you out at last. You had better come straight to me than go prospecting round on a blind trail. You know me now?"

She forgot her doubts and fears, and bounding forward threw her arms about his neck.

"Oh, Frank, Frank, you have been so cruel! and I waited in vain so long for some token."

"That's all right; but don't you see I had to look after my neck? A live lover is better than a dead husband; and when I saw you come I was happy. I've got one deal to make here, Raquel, and then we will go away together. Will you help me?"

"Will I live? Can you ask me? My doubts are all forgotten now that you are here. What is it that I can do?"

"Take care of a prisoner for me. You and Alan can guard him and nurse him for a few days. I mean him no harm, and as soon as I get through with the Go-Down I will turn him loose. Argado, I will pay well; and you, little one, will ask nothing, I know, but my love, as a reward."

"Anything you ask I will do. I trust you once more, and thoroughly; but oh, for your life's sake do not fail me again."

And with her hatred all gone, her love all awake Raquel resigned herself to do his bidding.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WORK OF A TRAITOR.

On the morning after the trouble at the Star Saloon, the first man out of the stockade at Go-Down shaft was the Red Sport. Although just returned from the successful trail-hunt of Lalaree, he was about starting out again on another quest, that promised to be more difficult and delicate. He had not only to rescue Bruce Arden, but first he must identify him; and when even Lalaree, bewildered as she had been by darkness and treachery, was not too certain,

Scarlet Bear was willing to admit that his task was a hard one, though he did not shrink from it.

But as he was the first man out, he was the one to discover that, some time in the night, some one had approached the stockade and with a bowie-knife pinned a letter to the gate.

There it hung, a warning and a menace, that was disagreeable enough, for its presence there proved that, spite of the watch that was suffered to be kept, an enemy had been able, unperceived, to approach within striking distance.

Without showing any signs of his discomfort the Red Sport took down the missive, thrust the weapon into his belt with as much coolness as though it belonged there, and retraced his steps to find Lalaree. Anything in writing was a touch above him.

"Not back!" exclaimed the girl. "Surely you will not break your pledge to me. He must be found if I go myself."

"Go slow, leetle red girl. Red Sport find this stuck up outside. Read um first, then chief go on trail."

The missive was written with a lead pencil, in a flowing hand, though on a scrap of paper torn from an old note-book.

"HIGH PINE.

"To ALL IT MAY CONCERN:—The man known as Bruce Arden is in good hands, that will nurse him up and let him go in due time. We have no use for him, and there are reasons why he will not be harmed. Search for him will not only be useless, but might cause a catastrophe.

"CAPTAIN DICK."

This was the message read by Lalaree, and a few moments later it was placed before Dave Dorland, and the rest.

"What does it mean, Joe?" was Dorland's query, as he looked over the paper with a puzzled eye.

"To throw us off the scent some way. Ef they git a few hours' start on us in these mountains how long do yer s'pose it would be afore any crowd the Go-Down kin turn out would find what become of him?"

"I'm not so sure. If he never comes back they'll know we've got it fine on 'em that the Hawks killed him; but I don't see how they'd care fer that when they've done enough to hang a regiment for. There's something deeper behind this; or else it means just what it says and if we let them alone he'll turn up all right. There's more in this resemblance of these two men than I saw at first. Who are they?"

Faro Frank had indeed more than one end to serve in playing his card. He shrewdly reasoned that if they stayed at home one day they would not only find nothing, but on the next would certainly be out on the search. In that way on that day, which would be Sunday, there might be a chance to pick them off in detail.

And then there was something in this resemblance. He had his plot to utilize it if other things failed, though it was the truth that, prisoner though he might be, Bruce Arden's life was, for the present, safe.

Lalaree cared nothing for these speculations. It was difficult enough to keep her in out of the reach of danger. She cut the discussion short,

"Whatever it may mean heed it not, but go at once—Mato Luta may tell the truth when he says that he can do best by himself; but if he fails we must not hesitate. We have wealth; what is it good for? We will buy a little army in High Pine and follow the outlaws to their mountain fastness. If we cannot rescue him we can avenge him."

"Ther girl talks sense, on'y it's like es not we'd git three Hawks out ov every four men we picked up in High Pine, an' I don't go much on the trash you kin pick up to fight fur money. But we'll make the understanding that Red Sport comes back Sunday night at the latest. Ef his hand is N. G., why we'll raise that army, an' take a fresh start Monday. I made a mistake with ther chap in 'Frisco, an' I'm ready to make up fur it hyar. Thet's squar'. Off ye go, Scarlet Bear."

"Off it is, an' Red Bear find him sure, you bet."

With the disappearance of the Indian the routine life of the Go-Down began; and though all tried to curb their impatience there was speculation, excitement and some sorrow when Sunday night came, and the Red Sport failed to put in an appearance.

It was near midnight when Si Camp, the treacherous Go-Downer who had met Faro Frank's emissary in the unsuspected presence of John Duke, a few nights before, began his work: and a few minutes later as he came slinking away from the huts that lay in one corner of the inclosure he halted suddenly and dropped motionless to the ground, while he peered cautiously at a single dark shadow that dropped from the wall of the stockade and flitted noiselessly along the wall toward the mouth of the shaft.

"Can it be one of the Hawks? They may have grown tired of waiting and sent a man in to prospect. Cursed reckless that would be."

For an instant the figure of the stranger was more clearly revealed as he darted across a narrow belt of light, and Camp saw the rugged outlines of a perfect stranger to him. It was John Duke, come with two revolvers and a hard head to make his deal on the Go-Down.

But though Duke was a stranger to Camp, it was by no means sure that he was not one of the Hawks, and while he hesitated, utterly unable to see his way to any course of action, he saw the man plunge boldly down the shaft.

As Duke disappeared, Camp, on tip-toe, hastily approached the shaft, and was able to make out that the intruder was descending, hand under hand, the thick rope that stretched away into the black night of the pit.

"Dashed if I know what to do," muttered Camp to himself. "If I give an alarm it will spoil the game for the night. If I shake him off it would mash his bones; but then it might be Frank himself, for all I know. He's struck bottom anyhow, and blamed if he ain't starting a light."

Bending over the edge of the shaft, Camp could see first the feeble sputter of a match, away below him, and then the steady flame of a lantern, that revealed the intruder looking around him like one that had got back to familiar quarters, for without hesitation he stepped

away from the spot, and disappeared in a drift that ran under the hillside.

"I've got you now," chuckled Camp. "Friend or foe we'll leave you there till we see which side to take you on."

Silently he began winding up the rope until the end was a dozen feet above the rocky floor of the shaft.

"If he gets out till we're ready to let him out," continued Camp, as he fastened the windlass, "you can just call me the boss liar of High Pine. Now for the signals to the Hawks. If they do their work, all right. If they don't, a young man of the size of Si Camp will have to slope before morning. I wonder how Tom feels out there on the beat, alone? Not too frisky, you bet."

He passed away from the spot; went through the gate of the stockade, which he left open; and soon, for the second time since Dave Dorland had come to the fore, the beleaguered were charging in, with full confidence that now, at last, revenge and the richest strike in High Pine was theirs.

CHAPTER XV.

BURIED ALIVE.

WHEN Murray Brandt and the Hawks had made their attack upon the Go-Down, several months before, they had won their way in at the expense of the life of a careless sentinel. This time the sentinel was neither careless nor killed. He was so much on the alert that, with his slugs jingling in his pockets, he had withdrawn to High Pine a quarter of an hour before Si Camp came out to finish his preparations, as laid out for him in the conversation that John Duke had overheard.

Meantime the mine seemed at last utterly defenseless, for within not a moving form could be seen, nor a sound heard save the long-drawn breaths of the sleepers. If Faro Frank did not wish to strike at High Pine until he could annihilate the entire party, this seemed to be his chance.

Yet just as Faro Frank and his Hawks came rushing through the gate in blind confidence, there was an alarm, given from a quarter whence it was least expected.

John Duke was playing a lone hand at the Go-Down, but he did not intend to throw away any chances. Hastily he explored the drift, smiled to himself once or twice, and finally returned to the shaft with a satisfied look upon his face. He knew now exactly how the land lay below.

At the shaft a surprise awaited him. The rope down which he had climbed had disappeared.

Duke uttered his usual soft whistle.

"Dog-gone my tail-feather, ef my bridges ain't burned! I'll hev to bunch my hand on this deal. Some cuss hes draw'd up ther rope. Le's see how fur it's gone, though, afore we howl. Mebbe we'll be in time fur ther tea-party arter all."

He raised his lantern high above his head and peered up the shaft. Dimly and indistinctly he saw the mouth and the shadowing windlass away

above. He thought, too, that he could see the hook of the rope floating in the air, at some uncertain distance.

"Ha, ha! Ef me ole eyes don't deceive me, I've got 'em yit. They mustn't think they kin fool John Duke ov Denmark."

He set the lantern down, and from his waist uncoiled a rope that he carried there. Trying the running noose at the end to see that it slipped freely, he stepped back to one side of the shaft, and then flung the lasso upward. It struck the rope of the windlass, but did not catch.

Twice more he made his casts, and then the noose tightened on the hook, and Duke had re-established his line of communication with the upper world. He tried it carefully, and then began an ascent, that showed that he was wanting in neither nerve nor muscle. As he emerged from the shaft, he glanced at the open gate of the stockade and saw Faro Frank's men stealing through.

Without hesitation he drew a revolver and fired full at the advancing crowd.

A man went down, and seeing that silence was now useless, the outlaws sprung forward with a yell, though they expected no opposition.

At the startling report, Dave Dorland and Geyser Joe sprung up with heavy eyes, dazed brains, and yet full of the instinct of fight.

Half-dressed as they were, they caught up their belts and slung them around them, as they rushed out to see what was the matter.

The Hawks were coming. The moment the two appeared, there was a volley of fire-arms, that sent a shower of lead spattering spitefully around them.

"Ho, there, boys! This way for the Go-Down!" yelled Dorland, and out came their ready revolvers.

"Click—click—click!" the useless hammers fell. Si Camp had managed to do his work but too well. The tampered-with cartridges failed to explode, while, to make more certain, the workmen were lying in a drugged sleep. Only Joe Beams answered to Dave Dorland's call, and on his revolver the same witchcraft seemed to have been used.

Back into its holster Dorland flung his useless pistol, and from his breast drew a smaller weapon that he always carried there.

No man could shoot faster, or with more deadly aim. Like rattling hail sounded the sharp patter of his shots, but though each of the five bullets struck a living mark, the rush was not checked. If two or three men did drop, and as many more wince sharply under the little leaden pills, what was that among a score of savage men, excited by wild reports of the wealth protected by the Go-Down stockade?

"No use, Dandy, they've got us!" exclaimed Geyser Joe. "See after Marion, and I'll look for Maud. We'll cut our way out somehow. Come in, Joe."

The three men leaped within the door, which they slammed to just in the faces of the Hawks, and dropped a bar behind it.

"They'll scatter 'round ther house and give a better chance fur a rush," was Burke's thought, as he dashed into the little room where Lalaree slept.

The bed was vacant. Certainly her form had not pressed the couch that night, as Burke could see by the light that streamed in through the open door.

"Good heavens! the girl's not here. Is she with Marion?"

The exclamation of Geyser Joe was answered by the appearance of Dave Dorland upon the threshold, carrying in his arms the motionless form of his wife, who seemed to be in a deep, unnatural slumber.

"No! The girl must have slipped out to try and meet Red Bear. If so without doubt she has fallen into those outlaw hands again. There is nothing we can do for her now; we must try and save ourselves. Then we can think of rescue and revenge."

"Which way then? They'll smoke us out of here in a minute; and some devil has tampered with our revolvers so that we stand a poor show for fight."

"Break for the shaft," interposed Joe Beams. "Slide down the rope an' stand off in ther drift. By good luck I've got a box of cartridges thar, an' fifteen sich gangs couldn't get at us. We'll just fill that shaft up with stiffs."

"And how will we get out?"

"The Red Sport is somewhere on ther trails an' they won't take him in so easy. He'll drop along, easy like, see how the land lays, an' bring High Pine down fur a row. High Pine is hard; but it's ready fur a brush when it sees a good chance."

"Good! I see no better chance, and we will try it. Some traitor has been at work who has drugged our camp, for I hear nothing of our boys. Be ready to follow me, one on each side. There!"

As the door went down with a crash, the three men, each with a knife in his hand, and Dave Dorland with his wife, Marion, upon his shoulder, leaped through the suddenly opened window-shutter at the further end of the cabin, and made a straight dash for the shaft.

The distance to cover was but a few yards, and they were half over it before a squad of their enemies closed in on them. For a moment there was a sound that resembled the snapping and snarling of wild beasts; up and down went three knives; on the air sounded more than one pistol-shot; and just as Faro Frank, followed by the balance of the Hawks, reached the spot, the three men burst through, and with blood spouting from half a dozen wounds, gained the shaft, and, one by one went sliding down the rope, before the eager pursuers could guess their object.

And from the bottom of the shaft, a moment later, as Tom Brace leaned eagerly over the brink, there came a little shoot of flame, followed by a muffled report.

Up into the air went Brace's arms; for an instant he trembled at the edge of the pit; and then pitched heavily forward, rushing down into the black depths below.

The unexpected shot caused a momentary panic, and the men who were just poising their pistols to pour a volley down the shaft, cowered back and looked around, uncertain what next was to be done. The delay allowed the fugitives the chance that saved them, for Faro

Frank here dashed up, and threw himself upon the windlass.

"Up with it, boys! we'll bring 'em to light!"

Two or three caught at the handles and whirled them around; but they were too late, for, at the first upward motion, Joe Beams, the last man on the rope, suddenly loosened his hold and dropped, unhurt, half a dozen feet to the floor below.

"All right, hyar!" he shouted, cheerfully. "Watch 'em a leetle an' I'll be back with ther cartridges. Then we kin hold 'em level!"

"That's good enough," said Dave Dorland, turning to Burke. "We're all safe, and the fresh air is beginning to revive Marion. Who fired that shot? Some of the boys must be in the mine; but I didn't know there was one of them good for that distance and light."

"You can't prove nothin' by me. Hyar's ther corpse though; an' he hes it plum through ther nozzle. He kim mighty nigh to knocking me off ther rope."

"An' hyar's yer cartridges. Bet rocks them won't miss fire. Load up."

With weapons recharged the three men stood, on the watch; and once or twice fired shots upward as they thought they caught glimpses of the Hawks above. For a time at least they could hold their own there; and if it had not been for the uncertainty as to Lalaree the party would have been full of hope.

Faro Frank was as well aware as themselves that Maud Burke had not come from the cabin, and at the head of a squad he made a hasty search to see if, by chance, she had been left behind. But there were no traces of her, either in the huts or the stockade, and he was forced to believe that she had slipped through his fingers. At once he dispatched three or four trusty men for further search, and then returned to the mouth of the shaft.

"Ho, below there, Dave Dorland! Are you willing to come to terms?"

"There are no terms between us but those made by the revolver. Men that jump claims give or take no others. We're not whipped yet, Faro Frank. You may have the stockade; but we hold the shaft; and we'll keep it. Now, stand back. The next answer you get will be from a muzzle that never has to speak twice."

"I reckon he's got us, Cap. We don't want to frolic around hyer fur nuthin', an' it's dead sure we can't get at 'em in that hole sence they've loaded up ag'in with cartridges. What yer goin' to do about it?"

And just then the question was emphasized by two shots that struck two heads that had inadvertently protruded over the brink, in what, at best, would have been a vain effort to pierce the depths below.

Though, by a chance that was lucky for them, the two men were only wounded, the Hawks were maddened by the sight, and Faro Frank knew that whatever devilish deed he might propose they would second.

"I'll show you what I'll do. Tear up one of those shanties and bring the trash here."

By the side of the shaft there lay some planks, and these were placed across the opening. Upon them was gathered quickly a great heap of materials.

Then, through a crack between two of the boards, Faro Frank shouted down:

"Dandy Darke! you and your men, for the last time! Will you come to terms, or shall we burn you out?"

The answer was a pistol-shot that missed the head of the speaker by only a few inches.

"Light her up, boys. I'll keep my word."

Then there was the striking of a match, and soon high in air rose the flaring flame; and when the mass of combustibles had thoroughly ignited, Faro Frank, with a Satanic smile on his thin lips, thrust the boards asunder, aided by a dozen willing hands. Down the shaft poured the flood of flaming brands, and on top of them the Hawks cast more of the debris of the wrecked cabin, with planks, windlass, and the scattered wood.

"There, if that don't smoke them out draw their fire; and at the first shot fill in the shaft. We'll fight fire with fire, and if we can't succeed that way we'll bury them alive. I leave them in your charge, Dick. I and three men have business elsewhere."

CHAPTER XVI.

A FIENDISH DEED.

THE chief of the Hawks only knew that Lalaree had not fallen into his hands, and had not been one of those who retreated to the shaft. He supposed that she had probably made her escape before the attack, and the question now was whether she had hidden somewhere in the neighborhood or gone on up to the town.

If the latter should be the case, it was rather important to know how High Pine was going to take the intelligence of his reckless attack upon the mine. As a general thing such difficulties were considered purely personal, and the parties were allowed to fight it out between themselves.

This case was a little the most flagrant of any that had occurred, and in addition there had been a slight influx of more enlightened inhabitants, who might succeed in stirring up the people.

But High Pine turned out to be quiet enough, and Faro Frank was glad, for he was in haste to execute plans of his own, of which his men knew next to nothing. He had sworn to have Lalaree. He had even hoped to make her his wife; though his game was a desperate one, which he had not yet relinquished. Her disappearance at the present moment was a check; but he vowed that he would yet find her, though just now he had to attend to other business.

The muffled noise of the firing below, hardly audible even to a listening ear, seemed to have attracted no attention, for not a soul did he meet; and he and his men strolled noiselessly toward the cabin occupied by Raquel Argado. It stood there upon the edge of the canyon, a darker spot in the darkness, and no sound nor streak of light came from within.

He crept cautiously up to the door, and knocked lightly thrice, each time giving three quick taps. Then, through a crack, he whispered:

"Raquel!"

Almost instantly there was a sound within, the bar was raised, and the woman's voice responded:

"Is that you, Frank?"

"Yes. My plans are succeeding better than I had hoped for. I'll take your visitor away now; and when I come back you will find me all that you wish. You will never need to accuse me of coldness again."

As he spoke she opened the door wider and he entered.

There were two sleepers there. Upon a blanket spread upon the floor lay Alan Argado, in a drunken slumber; while upon a rude bunk just beside him was the young man, the prisoner, with bound ankles and a bandaged arm.

Faro Frank raised from the floor a lantern, and bending over, by its dubious light contemplated the face of the prisoner for a moment, and then awakened him by a rude shake of the shoulder.

With a start the young man opened his eyes.

"Come, you can harm my hand no longer; I have changed my game, and am going to let you go. I've rigged you out in the togs that all High Pine knows, and if you choose to set up for Faro Frank, devil a one of them can tell the difference; and as Raquel and I are going away, we'll never split. Hunt up your little squaw, if you want to, but take care she don't shoot you on sight. Between Faro Frank and the Go-Down crowd there is war to the knife."

"But I am not Faro Frank."

The young man spoke coolly. He had all his senses, though physically weak.

"Ha, ha! Prove it. I'm Bruce Arden; so you must be his cousin Frank. Make Dandy Darke believe anything else when he looks along his barrels. Come, though! I've no time for folly. Follow me like a man of sense, or we'll carry you like a corpse. Remember, I'll shoot at the first motion."

"I'll do the best I can till I see your hand. I may be weak, but you can't scare me."

"Hush, then, and come on!"

With a quick stroke he cut the cords, and the young man rolled from the bunk, ready to obey orders. Before Faro Frank could lead away Raquel caught him by the arm.

"I have trusted you this once more; but if you fail me now, beware. I will never trust again. When will you come back to me?"

"Soon, soon! But, Raquel, there is some wild work going on, and I may yet want this as a place of refuge. Bar your door, and watch for me till morning. Good-by, little one."

He spoke lightly, and as he ceased speaking he stooped, and as lightly dropped a kiss on her lips. Then, with his one hand grasping the collar of his captive, and the other holding a revolver, he went out into the night.

Could Raquel believe that he would betray her? No! Again she had faith, and blindly obeyed his orders, barring the door and waiting with hope in the darkness.

Her wait was not for long.

The men with Faro Frank had remained without, unnoticed. Now, at a whispered word from him, they silently approached and applied their shoulders to the side of the cabin that was furthest from the gulch. They tugged and strained, and lifted. Then, with a crash, the little hut burst from its moorings, trembled for a moment, poised in the air, and then, rolling

over and over, shot straight down over the brink of the precipice.

An awful scream; a horrid muffled crash, two hundred feet below. That was the way Faro Frank came back.

Now that the deed was done, the men that had aided looked around in a troubled, wondering sort of way. They were shocked at their own work.

It was not Faro Frank's policy to give them much time to think. With the rage of murder on them, his own tigers might turn and rend him.

"Come on now, men. You've each a hundred in your pockets, and by morning I will pay you the other hundred, besides your share of the ore that is stacked up in the Go-Down shaft. Help me through, and you have my share of that, too."

The deed had stunned Arden. After such diabolical work he knew not what to expect next. He let himself drift. As the gambler-outlaw ordered, so he did; and now again toward the Go-Down they steered their course.

On the hill-side, not far from the stockade, they halted. The moon looked straight down upon them; below they could catch a glimpse of a waning fire, and could hear a muttered roar from Dave Dorland's camp. The Hawks were there, in full possession, and had found some plunder, even if they had not yet reached the shaft.

"Go on, boys, and leave me here with this rooster. Remember what we have agreed on, and wait for me at yonder turn."

At this order, without question the men left the spot, and captor and captive stood facing each other in the moonlight.

"I'm sorry for you, Bruce," said the gambler, quite coolly. "When we first ran together, I meant to let you down light; but I found that you and I were both on the same game, and couldn't both win, so that set me to thinking, and I'm afraid I've set it up on you bad. The fact is, my dear cousin, I'll have to get rid of you."

I might say, by the way, that we took the shaft a few hours ago, and they're all dead but Lalaree. Now, if one cousin is dead, the man that is left alive must be the other one, and I'm that same young sport. It seems you've been too dull to discover that, back East, our respected Uncle Henry is dead, and his hundred thousand dollars is there, waiting for that scapegrace, Bruce Arden, to come back. I'm coming. That's the game."

"And you think such a transparent plot will win? Never. I may die; but whether I do or not, you will fall into your own pit. Gambler, thief and murderer that you are, the sword of justice will drop on you with a certain blow. It may even nerve my broken right arm to strike you. Work your will on me, if you can; and then see how fate will laugh at your cunning. Lalaree will never be yours."

Over his broken arm Bruce Arden laid his sound one, and, after one reel from weakness, looked his cousin firmly in the face.

"You know I always hated you a little," added Faro Frank, and from his side rose his cocked derringer.

Then there was a rushing and a rustle of garments, and, as the pistol came into line, Laralee, unarmed and panting, flung herself before it, with her arm around Arden's neck, exclaiming:

"You shall not! Devil that you are, you shall not take his life!"

CHAPER XVII.

JOHN DUKE MAKES HIS DEAL.

IN the Go-Down shaft there was for a time much suspense, but no one for an instant thought of a parley. Dandy Darke had gauged his old foe pretty thoroughly, and the very fact that he had waited so long to strike was evidence that he intended, when he did, to make clean work of it. Even if he had been satisfied that, upon giving up the fateful shaft, they would all be allowed to depart in safety, Dorland would have sternly refused any such terms; but he felt convinced that no compact would be kept by the tigers above, and resolved that it was better to meet even death, below, than trust to the treacherous mercies of those above. Above all he had a strongly settled belief that they could hold the place until the Red Sport, who was both shrewd and desperate, would devise some means to aid them.

Had Marion only been in a place of safety both Dorland and Burke would have only felt aroused to a spirit of stern resistance; but her presence, bravely though she bore her awful danger, made them at times shiver with a dread that was new to them.

When Faro Frank for the last time challenged them to surrender, Dave Dorland answered with a pistol-shot; and then all waited anxiously the next move, knowing that it would soon be developed.

"By heavens!" exclaimed Dave, as he caught the glimmer of light above, "they are going to try fire. They will make it hot for us yet if we don't get back."

"All right! Can't be much worse off. That's the beauty of them doors I put in ther drift. We'll wait an' see ef they mean it, an' ef they do, we'll fall back an' close up."

Geyser Joe, in view of just such a contingency, had put a frame in the slope, to which he had fitted doors that were almost if not altogether air-tight. These would keep out the smoke, which would otherwise fill the drift and strangle the occupants.

It did not take long to develop the intentions of their foes. When the heap of materials above had burst into a roaring flame, the planks which supported them were thrust aside and down came an avalanche of brands, that, heaping up at the bottom of the shaft, glowed and glared like a furnace seven times heated.

Back from the mouth of the drift rushed the four, slamming to the doors behind them, and then standing in that most trying of all positions, an agony of waiting.

At the time that they first reached the bottom of the shaft, Geyser Joe had imagined that one of their men had gained the spot before them: but in the confusion he had forgotten him. Now the fall of a stone or a clod of dirt in the drift before them suddenly recalled him to his mind, and he called out:

"Ho, thar! Is any one about? Ef you're a Go-Down come this way."

"I'm 'round, Geyser Joe," answered the cool, quiet voice of John Duke. "I ain't exactly a Go-Downer, 'cause yer won't let me kim in; but if yer mean biz I'm still hyer to dicker. An' ef yer let me in on ther ground floor I'll kim fur all I'm wu'th."

"It's that bummer again!" exclaimed Dandy Darke, with a strained laugh. "You've wanted a share in the Go-Down, and now you've got it; but you might as well have claimed six feet of dirt up around High Pine, as come to roast down here. You're in the wrong shop for dicker now."

"When foxes is plenty don't be a goose. What I want to know, pard, is ef ye'r' goin' to lemme in. I reckon thar ain't a fortune in this hyer hole jest now, an' ef yer hangs off on a sixth now ye deserves to roast, an' blamed ef I don't leave yer to it. Geyser Joe's doors ain't a-workin' ary too well. I begins to smell brimstone a'ready, an' I ain't goin' to linger long. Up an' down, now, how is yer on ther trade?"

"Man, quit your nonsense. If you are a friend, come here and help us fight the smoke out; if you are a foe, declare yourself, and we will fight it out here and now."

"Tbankee, but when a man's playin' a lone hand he uses his trumps to suit hisself. I ain't a-trustin' meself in yer fingers till we come to a trade. Ef yer got a sudden crazy spell, you'd send me up the flume a-howlin'."

Marion so far had been silent. Though revived, somewhat, by her journey through the open air, she had all along been borne on her husband's shoulder, and was but just coming fairly to her senses. She heard John Duke's proposition with a thrill of hope.

"Oh, Dave, do not throw away a chance! We are in the mine, are we not? Why bandy words? If this man will stand by us to the end, why hesitate to promise him all that he asks? If aid does not come from some direction, what will the Go-Down be worth to us?"

"That's truth, from the bottom of ther well. They say foxes is all tail an weemen all tongue, but that thar's tongue that sez solid sense, every time. Jist hear her shout. Say! Yer goin' to lemme in?"

"In Heaven's name come in," exclaimed Dave Dorland, angered in spite of himself by the strange persistence of the man.

"On ther ground floor, an' ondevided sixth?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Give us yer hand, pard, for ninety days. Ther deal's made, an' now I'll show yer a wrinkle that I reckon thar's no one but John Duke could post yer on. Foller me."

As he spoke, there was the flicker of a match as Duke relighted his lantern, and they saw their ragged-looking guide, with a look of intense satisfaction on his face, ready to lead the way.

There was no mistaking that look of confidence. He knew of a method of exit that the Go-Downers, sharp-eyed as they were, had never found, and before they had gone many paces, it was reached. On one side of the drift, at a hight of half a dozen feet, there was a depression that looked like a partial cave,

"Gimme a boost, hyer, an' I'll show yer ther wrinkle that puts John Duke into a fortune. Thar's a leetle bit of a wall hyer thet a child could pull down, but it's kept a heap of strong men out."

Sure enough! The opening was disclosed, and by dint of hard climbing the five found themselves in a crevice-like passage that running at right angles to the Go-Down drift, led them by a somewhat tortuous passage to another wall which opened out upon what seemed a face of solid rock.

"Now, I dunno ef my rope is long enough to tetch bottom; but ef it is I reckon there'll be a party of about our size on ther war-path shortly; an' ther Hawks will jist git ther difficability that'll fill their gizzards. You never seen me shoot, eh? Well, I'm just lively on ther shoot; plank rocks on that, every time!"

As he spoke he fastened his rope, that he had been careful to reclaim from the windlass, to a stout stick that he thrust into a crevice of the rock. Then he glided down, and was next heard calling from below.

"Come slow. There's a drop of 'bout five feet, an' then ye'r' on terry firmy."

Soon all were gathered together on solid ground, but as they turned their faces toward High Pine, there came from close at hand a woman's shrill scream, followed quickly by the crash of a revolver.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PARDES' HOME DEAL.

THE sudden coming of Lalaree flurried Faro Frank a little, and the recognition unnerved him. For the flurry he fired; but, at the same instant, for the recognition he raised his hand, and the bullet went hissing over her head.

Nerved by the emergency, Arden thrust the girl aside, sprung forward like a panther, and with the hand of his unbroken arm seized Faro Frank by the throat.

At the bend the Hawks, looking back, saw the attack, and came running to the assistance of their mate, pistols in hands.

But from the mountain-side, just at their flank, there flashed a sheet of flame, as the fugitives from the Go-Down poured in their fire at close quarters, and at the crash every man went down. Then Dandy Darke and his pards came rushing to the rescue.

One arm against two—the chances of the struggle were too unequal. Faro Frank, as that nervous gripe tightened on his neck, instinctively dropped his derringer and clinched his cousin in a fierce gripe of hate. Even yet he did not understand his own desperate state, or he might have made his escape. Just as the volley was fired which dropped his friends, he was turning Bruce Arden over his hip, with a savage oath, and the crash never reached his ears.

"Ah, curse you, I have you now. Keep off, girl, or I will slay you, too."

"Hunky dunky, hyer! All down but nine. Set 'em up on t'other alley! Wahoo! Red Sport's 'round!"

The Indian was on the trail at last! Dave Dorland, too, was only a few yards away, but he would have been too late. It was the Red

Sport who, flying down the trail, hurled himself upon Faro Frank as he was drawing from his pocket a twin derringer, tore him from his prey, and lifting him high in the air dashed him to the ground with a mighty crash. Then Dandy Darke, Geyser Joe and the others came up, and for the present Lalaree and her lover were safe. With rapid hands they bound and gagged the gambler outlaw.

"Now, strike kiver hyer, an' hole on. You'll hear from ther rest ov ther tea-party afore long, an' we may es well fight it out right hyer, ef they'll on'y come."

John Duke made no great mistake, for the pistol-shots had been heard below, and half a dozen men came creeping cautiously up the trail. It might have been better if all or none had come. The blood of the Go-Down partners was up, and they showed but little mercy. Every bullet had its billet; and fortunately Captain Dick was the first man that dropped to their fire.

Then, after a hasty word of consultation, the two girls and Bruce Arden were left in concealment, guarding the prisoner, while the rest, headed by Dave Dorland, sternly charged down in an effort to regain the property from which they had just been ousted.

It was a ruinous-looking scene within the stockade, and the men there, trusting to luck and their guards, were in little condition to face the pistol princes that now confronted them. Besides, the Hawks had lost their leaders, and their strength had been frittered away in detail. They were no longer overwhelming in numbers, and the appearance of Dandy Darke and Geyser Joe was much like the rising of ghosts at midnight. The men they had thought roasting at the bottom of the pit were, instead, alive, comparatively unharmed, and bent on vengeance. Like frightened sheep, the little squad of Hawks cowered together, and though they fired an irregular volley, it did no damage, and the next minute ten revolvers covered them, while Dorland's voice rung out loud and clear:

"Hold, there! I'm tired of slaughter, and there's no law in High Pine to turn you over to. We hold the drop and can slay you all where you stand: but I'd sooner show mercy. Pledge yourselves to leave these regions at once, by the southern trail, never to return on penalty of being shot down whenever or wherever we meet you. Do this or meet instant death. You have one minute to decide."

The Hawks stood like statues; but from one to another muttered whispers passed along. Then one spoke out:

"Whar's Faro Frank, Captain Dick, and ther rest of ther boys?"

"Dead!" was the harsh, terse answer.

"All right, then, pard. I guess you's got us. We weaken. Ef yer could take *them* inter camp, we wouldn't be a mouthful. Ther Hawks is jest dead gone bu'sted, an' we puckachee ther ranch, but thar's a couple wounded pards up ther hills, an' a man er so. Give them ther same terms. By-by! we's a-movin'."

Out went the little file of outlaws, guarded by the Go-Dowhers who watched them until they were lost in the shadows of the south.

But the Hawks had no idea of treachery.

They were only too glad to escape the fate of their comrades, and High Pine was actually and really rid of their presence.

Then Dandy Darke and his friends sought the hidden party, and brought them, with the prisoner, again to the stockade.

There was no question now in the mind of Lalaree. She recognized Bruce Arden, beyond a doubt, in the young man with the broken arm. He, despite the rough handling he had received, was better than a dozen dead men, although half a dozen times that night he had come near fainting from pain.

He told his story briefly but clearly, going back to what happened in San Francisco.

Geyser Joe had seen him following close behind Lalaree, one evening, and stepping in front of him, had quietly knocked him senseless. A few days later the hired tools of Murray Brant had struck upon his track, and came near to compassing his death, so near that for weeks it was thought they had succeeded. With them Bruce Arden had mixed Geyser Joe, and when, months after, he was able to take the trail, and heard of Lalaree in company with him, and Murray Brant on the way to High Pine, he formed his own conclusions and set out to avenge if not to save; for in his mind Geyser Joe and Joseph Burke were two separate identities, and as he had only seen the former as a shoulder-hitter, he never thought of him as the putative father of the dark-eyed Maud, who had won his heart.

In the gulches to the north he had come upon the wondering Raquel, who deceived by the strange resemblance, had thrown a quarrel upon him which ended in the shot that brought him down. Then she had glided away.

The next thing he knew clearly was his being captured by the mock Apaches. Then, though his brain was still dazed, he met Faro Frank in the gulch below the camp of the Hawks; and the outlaw, looking carefully at his cousin, and remembering the strangeness of the old-time resemblance, and learning from the three Hawks something of his feeling in regard to Lalaree, and her brave defense of him in the gulch, hatched out the plan that he followed to the

end. It could do no harm, he thought, and might win. He took Bruce Arden's clothing, supplying him with some of his own, and making some other alterations, entered the camp proper as his own prisoner!

But, Bruce Arden, being loosely guarded, made his escape, with one of the outlaws' horses, and flanking High Pine by a long and circuitous path, entered the place from the south to seek for Murray Brant, concerning whom Faro Frank could give no information. Then came the quarrel with Geyser Joe, his own fruitless shot followed by one, not from Burke but from Argado; and the rest of the story, which the reader already understands.

As he told of the awful death of Raquel and the sleeping Argado, even Geyser Joe was deeply moved.

"Ther man is a devil. Argado tried fur my life once, but she saved it. I'll avenge her now. The man must hang."

"Amen!" responded Dave Darland, with knit brow and flaming eyes, and with those words Faro Frank's doom was sealed.

Shortly after daylight there was a stir in High Pine. The rumor of the deadly work at the Go-Down, spread over the town, and half the population went to see what truth there was in the story that Faro Frank had come back with a desperate gang and sacked the mine.

Faro Frank was indeed back—hanging by the neck to the limb of a tree, and a great, newly-made mound showed where the dead Hawks had been buried. The drugged men were at work already at the shaft, for, until he could replace them with better, Dandy Darke retained them, though he had suspicions; and altogether it was evident that the Go-Down was not going to change hands yet.

So we take leave of High Pine and its haunts, with Marion safe and happy, Lalaree secure in the affection of her lover, and the Go-Down pards perfectly satisfied with the deal that let John Duke in, though he might come for millions.

THE END.

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